Most working people in the United States do not have paid family leave through their jobs, including about 79 percent — about 1,371,000 workers — in Iowa. Even unpaid leave under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act is inaccessible for 64 percent of Iowans. The lack of paid leave exacerbates the state’s economic and care challenges — from the cost of living to an aging population, with devastating costs for Iowans and their families, public health and the economy.

Impossible choices between work and family are hurting Iowa’s economy, and women suffer most. Paid leave means people — especially women — aren’t forced to leave the labor force to care for their families or health.

In Iowa, there is a 10 percentage-point gap in labor force participation between women and men.

Nationally, if women participated in the U.S. labor force at the same rate as in Germany and Canada, our economy would benefit from more than $775 billion in additional economic activity each year.

In Iowa, a typical worker who takes four weeks of unpaid leave loses more than $3,400 in income.

Paid leave improves employee retention, morale and productivity, reducing turnover for employers of all sizes and boosting the economy. But small employers often cannot provide the benefit — and universal paid leave would help them do that.

Iowans are caught between their work and family responsibilities. Paid leave means not having to choose between job and family.

About 36,500 children are born in Iowa each year, and in 80 percent of all Iowa households with children — more than 552,000 homes — all parents report to work.

Women’s wages support their households. In Iowa, 79 percent of Black mothers, 51 percent of Latina mothers, 53 percent of white mothers and 52 percent of AAPI mothers are key family breadwinners. State-level data is limited, but nationally 64 percent of Native American mothers are breadwinners.
Women make up nearly half Iowa’s labor force (46 percent) and more than one-quarter of its business owners (26 percent).9
Across the country, many men want to play a larger role in caring for their children, but unsupportive policies and stigma hold them back.10

Iowa families’ care needs are increasing. Paid leave means older adults and disabled people can provide and receive care, and our care workforce is more resilient.

- More than one-quarter of Iowa workers are 55 and older,11 and in the next 20 years, Iowa’s population aged 65 and older will grow by 76,000.12
- Nationwide, nearly one third of all adults aged 55-64 — and 41 percent of older Black women and 43 percent of older Latinas — hold a physically demanding job,13 which may exacerbate or cause serious medical conditions that require care, particularly in older workers and workers with disabilities.14 In Iowa, that would mean 92,600 older workers, 900 older Black women workers and 1,600 older Latina workers.15
- About 40 percent of Iowa nursing homes have a shortage of direct care workers.16 Paid leave reduces nursing home utilization and can help recruitment and retention of care workers.17
- An estimated 338,000 Iowans report having long-term COVID-19 symptoms that affect their daily activities.18 Paid leave is a critical support as we continue through this mass disabling event, which disproportionately impacts women, people of color and workers with low incomes.19
- Paid leave helps family caregivers and disabled people (who are often caregivers themselves) manage their health and care needs while maintaining their income and employment.20

Iowans need a common sense, national paid leave program. We recommend one that:

- includes all workers, no matter where they live or work or what kind of job they have;
- replaces enough income that workers at any income level can afford leave;
- provides enough time and covers the range of major needs workers face, including addressing their own health conditions, caring for seriously ill, injured or disabled family members and welcoming newborn, newly adopted or foster children;
- provides education and outreach to ease implementation for workers and small businesses;
- has a sustainable funding source that is affordable for workers, employers and the government without harming other essential programs.

A national paid leave plan is the solution

National paid family and medical leave means a stronger economy, healthier families and businesses, and greater equality for all women and families.

To learn more, visit NationalPartnership.org/PaidLeave

A national paid leave plan is the solution

2. diversitydatakids.org. (2023, March). Indicators of FMLA Eligibility and Affordability for Working Adults. Retrieved 16 January 2024, from Brandeis University, The Heller School, Institute for Child, Youth and Family Policy website. https://data.diversitydatakids.org/dataset?ocab_subtopic=FMLA&ga=2.14449139.55119934.1673292061-1693714331.1656615545; Workers are considered unable to take unpaid FMLA leave because they are either ineligible based on employer size or job tenure requirements or because 12 weeks of lost wages from unpaid leave would result in their family income dropping to or below 200 percent of the Supplemental Poverty Measure.


11. See note 3.


15. See note 3; National Partnership analysis of 2018-2022 American Community Survey accessed via IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. Number of Black, non-Hispanic women and Hispanic/Latina women in the state’s labor force who are aged 55 to 64. We use a five-year dataset to have a sufficient sample size to analyze state-level data; due to pandemic-related labor force impacts in 2020 and 2021, this is a conservative estimate and we expect the population of older women workers to be higher in future years.


The National Partnership for Women & Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, reproductive health and rights, access to quality, affordable health care and policies that help all people meet the dual demands of work and family. More information is available at NationalPartnership.org.

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