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## **Wrong policy, wrong time: Mandated parental leave**

By Colin McNickle

Allegheny County Council could vote as soon as Oct. 20 on a compromise paid parental leave plan that a local think tank researcher says not only will be among the most generous in the nation but also have the potential to seriously damage the local economy.

“Championing further anti-business mandates like paid parental leave – and expanding paid sick time, which has received less attention thus far – will ... lead to further economic stagnation and a loss of jobs, pushing away the very families and residents this proposal is ostensibly intended to help,” research associate Alex Sodini reiterates (in *Policy Brief Vol. 26, No. 37*).

The revised plan approved by the county Board of Health (which proposed the initial plan citing “public health”) pared down the number of weeks of leave mandated (from 18 to 12); tightened the eligibility requirements (from 30 days worked to 6 months worked for full-time employees and 625 hours worked for part-timers); capped weekly benefits (from no cap to \$4,200); added stillbirth as a qualifying event and included a small business carveout (employers with fewer than 15 employees are exempt).

But even with the changes, Sodini says the measure is still arguably the most generous in the country.

“Nearly every other state has a tiered wage replacement system, such as a 90 percent replacement rate up to half of the statewide average weekly wage or minimum wage, with amounts above that threshold subject to a lower replacement rate up to a weekly maximum amount,” he notes. “Keep in mind, too, that the maximum weekly benefit cap ranges from \$1,765 in California – which only offers eight weeks of leave – to \$900 in Delaware.

“In other words, compared to the 14 other states and D.C. with a mandatory paid parental leave policy, Allegheny County’s full wage replacement rate with a weekly benefit cap of \$4,200 would be unprecedented,” Sodini says.

And do note, as Sodini reminds, that nearly every other jurisdiction that mandates parental leave utilizes a kind of social insurance model where the costs are spread out. The county's policy maintains individual employers fund the benefit themselves.

And myriad, just as onerous ancillary costs, Sodini stresses.

"Businesses subject to the mandate will still have to account for an employee's entire salary, the cost of a replacement (assuming one can be found), potential overtime for reassigned workers and/or the loss of income from the worker's productivity altogether," he says.

Sodini adds that it also remains unclear what effect mandating 12 weeks of paid parental leave will have on other benefits offered by businesses. Think paid time off, vacation days, healthcare or perks like scheduling flexibility.

The fallout stands to be very consequential, the think tank scholar says.

"Existing firms may still look to relocate outside of county limits while prospective businesses may choose not to invest in Allegheny County in the first place," Sodini says. "Others may have to forgo hiring additional permanent staff, reduce employees' hours or raise prices to cover costs.

"One public comment shared by the [health] board at its Sept. 16 meeting noted that the policy could dissuade businesses from hiring younger, eligible workers in the first place," he added.

The parental leave mandate and generous changes to the sick-leave policy come in concert with the chief executive's highlighting Allegheny County's tight financial situation, as detailed in the 2027 Comprehensive Fiscal Plan.

"There was also mention of the pension crisis, which officials have indicated will likely involve state action – including the possibility of increasing existing taxes or levying new ones.

"This only further demonstrates the dire need for economic and population growth" in Allegheny County, Sodini emphasizes.

And not public policies that are anathema to both.

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