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Panel Approves Paid Leave Under FMLA for Federal Workers

By Karoun Demirjian, CQ Staff

Legislation that would guarantee four weeks of paid leave to federal employees who are new parents was approved Wednesday by a House Oversight and Government Reform subcommittee.

The bill (HR 626) would pay federal workers their regular salary for four of the 12 weeks of leave they are entitled to under the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA — PL 103-3) to tend to the birth or adoption of a child. The Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce, Postal Service and the District of Columbia approved it by voice vote.

An aide said the full committee has not yet scheduled a markup for the bill.

The FMLA guarantees employees of any company of 50 workers or more 12 weeks off to tend to the birth or adoption of a child or the health needs of an ailing relative but does not require that the leave be paid.

The paid-leave bill would not apply to federal employees who have to care for a sick relative. Even so, if the legislation becomes law, the federal workforce — the largest in the country — would have one of the most generous paid-leave arrangements in the United States.

“It is a model project for the country,” said the bill’s chief sponsor, Carolyn B. Maloney, D-N.Y., who has introduced a form of the legislation in every Congress since 2000. “As a country that consistently talks about family values, it’s a way of putting rhetoric into reality.”

The House passed a similar bill last year by a vote of 278-146, and the issue again has the support of some Republicans, who cited it as a fiscally responsible gesture.

“These are our employees,” said Brian P. Bilbray, R-Calif. “We have the right to pass this legislation because we have the responsibility to pay for this benefit.”

But not all Republicans on the subcommittee saw things the same way.

“While maybe you can get away with that argument in normal times, I don’t agree with that principle right now,” said Rep. Mark Souder, R-Ind., who said he objected to the bill despite being sympathetic to the difficulties of child-rearing, citing the example of his daughter, who gave birth to Souder’s second grandchild Tuesday.

“Particularly at this point in time, when people in my district can’t find a job . . . to be generous with their money to government employees is a tad of an insult. This isn’t free money we’re taking out of our pockets here.”

No Republicans submitted amendments to the bill, but both Souder and subcommittee ranking Republican Jason Chaffetz of Utah expressed the hope that the bill would receive a more thorough vetting during the full committee's markup.

The Congressional Budget Office estimated that an earlier version of the bill would increase costs by \$190 million in the first year if federal workers were guaranteed eight weeks of paid leave.

Supporters of the bill say such projections are too high, because in federal workers often cover for each other when colleagues take time off, obviating the need to hire more people.

Of more concern, supporters said, was getting the United States in line with other industrialized nations, all of which — save Australia — mandate paid leave for workers to care for the birth of a child, according to a Harvard University study cited by many on the subcommittee.

And the need to do so during a recession, supporters said, was especially urgent.

“The need for this legislation is particularly timely. In this economic crisis, many families dependent on two incomes have been forced to make ends met on one salary,” said subcommittee Chairman Stephen F. Lynch, D-Mass. “We will be setting a standard for the nation to follow while both helping families to cope and stimulating the economy.”

The Senate has a companion bill (S 354) sponsored by Jim Webb, D-Va.

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