

Executive Summary

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Alleviating the Stress on Working Families: Promoting Family-Friendly Workplace Policies

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary families, paid work intersects with family needs in a conflictual manner. At some point in their lives, most individuals become caretakers of family members. Despite this occurrence, current work-family policies provide limited support and few consider that most individuals have both family- and work-related responsibilities. Supportive policies exist in some U.S. states and in other high-income countries that sustain the well-being of employees and their families, as well as the businesses that implement these policies. These efforts include workplace flexibility, expansion of family leave, and paid sick days. Because not all businesses are equally able to institute such policies, work-family policy discussions should include research findings and incorporate multiple stakeholders.

Conflict Between Work and Family

Families in the United States are changing at an unprecedented rate:

Currently, 57.7% of all women aged 16 years and older are in the labor force (72.6 million), compared to 70.2% of all men (82.3 million) and 71.3% of women with children younger than age 18 who are working outside of the home.

Most individuals become involved in caretaking for elderly, disabled, or ill family members. The number of men and women who are older than age 50 and are taking care of an elderly parent has tripled in the past 20 years—now more than 20 million individuals care for an elderly parent.

Despite such staggering figures, contemporary work-family policies, provide limited support.

Many policies, as well as business and school arrangements, reflect a mid-20th-century

perspective that families consist of a middle-class, two-parent household with one parent working outside the home for pay, and the other available at home to take care of domestic responsibilities and sick children, disabled family members, and elders' needs. This view does not mesh with 21st century realities. Only 6% of today's U.S. households contain a married couple with children younger than 18 and a wife not in the labor force who is at home taking care of household chores and dependents.

Given the growth of families in which both parents work, as well as the fact that more than one out of every 10 households are headed by a single parent, the need to negotiate family and work demands is urgent and widespread. The Families and Work Institute states that approximately one-third of U.S. employees report that they consistently must choose between advancing in their jobs or attending to their family or personal lives,

and one-third have dealt with elder care for a parent over the previous year.

These tensions between workplace and caregiving demands in the lives of many Americans has led the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to rank the United States in the bottom third of 34 countries with respect to work-life balance.

The United States Lags in Work-Family Policies

Most U.S. employers have been slow to institute family-friendly policies and programs.

Many employers and politicians say that the economic cost of policies such as workplace flexibility, job sharing, and paid leave are too great, despite evidence to the contrary.

Lack of policies that allow family members to care for those who are ill or elderly has led to a situation in which "work-family policies are now being shaped primarily by market forces.

TALKING POINTS

- Contemporary U.S. work-family policies provide very limited support to families.
- Research indicates that three cost-effective policies—workplace flexibility, paid leave, and paid sick days—can support the well-being of employees and their families, as well as the businesses that implement these policies.
- FMLA is unpaid and not all business can easily provide flexibility which makes it problematic for most workers to actually utilize this benefit.
- Work-family policy discussions must include research and multiple stakeholders such as state governments, businesses, and families.

Cost-Effective Policy Solutions to Support Working Families

Extensive research indicates that supportive policies exist in some U.S. states and in other high-income countries. These policies support the well-being of employees and their families, as well as the businesses that implement these policies. These efforts focus on three areas:

1. Workplace Flexibility

Research indicates that the most beneficial policy that supports individuals and families as they attempt to balance family and work is workplace flexibility. Having some control over when to work—and at times even where—allows workers to juggle the demands of long hours and care and domestic obligations.

Workplace flexibility does not just benefit workers; it also allows businesses to function at an optimal level. Workplace flexibility attracts better workers, reduces turnover, and increases productivity. Allowing workers flexibility over their schedules reduces stress and, in turn, diminishes absenteeism and turnover. This translates into savings of up to \$300 billion per year, or between \$496 and \$1,984 per employee per year.

Other types of flexibility could be instituted for businesses dependent on the presence of workers at regular times.

2. Expansion of Family Leave

The expansion of paid and unpaid family leave is a critical policy that allows individuals and families to balance their domestic and

work obligations. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) is the only federal law that specifically addresses employees' need to balance work and family.

Under the FMLA, workers can take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave due to illness, to care for a newborn or adopted child, or to care for an ill family member. However, given the policy's many restrictions, less than half of all workers in the United States are currently eligible. Because the law applies only to employers with 50 or more employees, about 60% of U.S. businesses are exempt from extending this provision.

Extensive research shows that businesses that offer paid leave have a lower rate of employee turnover and foster a more productive and loyal environment.

3. Paid Sick Days

Paid sick days ensure that employees can take time off not just for their own needs but also for the illness of a dependent family member.

The increased focus on paid sick days recognizes that working individuals have an ongoing responsibility to care for dependents that goes beyond childbirth and catastrophic illness.

Evidence shows that, on a net basis, paid sick days do not lower business profits. Instead paid sick days decrease employees taking "unnecessary sick days" and increase total employment.

Conclusion

- Instead of decreasing an employer's profits, work-life policies that draw on research can

contribute significantly to the overall success of businesses while concurrently supporting the health of American workers and their families.

- Negotiating work and family responsibilities affects all U.S. workers. However, not all businesses are equally able to institute such policies—given their size or constraints based on the service they provide—we also need to work with schools, health-care providers, and community agencies to implement new work schedules and programs that address the concerns of today's working families.
- Changes at the community level will help alleviate some of the stress on America's working families. This requires that work-family discussions and initiatives be at the forefront of legislative, business, and social scientific agendas and that they also meet the needs of the employees earning low incomes and those who are less educated. Family-friendly initiatives ultimately do not just assist individuals or employees. They also work to make us a stronger, globally competitive nation.

Please see the full brief for a complete list of references. References also are available upon request.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- Promote stakeholder participation in the formation of effective work-family policies to understand which policies are the most effective for different groups and to ensure that the appropriate people are at the table.
- Build effective partnerships between local businesses and state governments to make them accountable for implementing work-family policies that include low-income and less educated workers as well.
- Facilitate exchanges of examples of policies, programs, and practices that have proved successful in various regions of the country as well as effective local initiatives.



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