

A good starting point

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AT the Women's Summit last week, Rep. Tina Sablan made a Power Point presentation (<https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1nQ9sm5vfvQDbpGcujnuxdZ-9Smu7BkqlR3iQAqVKPTY/edit#slide=id.p15>) on paid family leave — a very popular policy proposal now being discussed by politicians and pundits in the states. Rep. Sablan believes the NMI should also consider it.

Selling the idea is very much like asking someone walking at noontime in the Mojave Desert if he or she wants an ice cold drink. The intent is admirable; the benefits are undeniable.

As in most discussions about policy proposals, however, we should ask the following questions: Who's paying? Can we afford it? How? What are the possible unintended consequences? Are there other ways to achieve the same end?

As Rep. Sablan indicated herself, we should consider her proposal as a starting point for more discussions, studies and consultations with CNMI stakeholders.

In her presentation, Rep. Sablan mentioned current policy for civil and excepted service government employees. What about the private sector? Sometimes when we talk about the private sector, it may seem that we are referring to one entity when in fact it is made up of various business companies of varying sizes — and policies regarding leave and other personnel issues.

In his testimony in February before the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources, one of the NMI's most respected local business executives, Triple J's Mike Sablan, noted the bigger challenges faced by small businesses in the Commonwealth when complying with one-size-fits-all mandates. In other words, in any discussion regarding paid family leave, small businesses must be heard, too.

According to Rep. Sablan, five states offer paid family leave: California, New Jersey, Massachusetts, New York and Rhode Island. Now let's compare the sizes of their 2016 Gross Domestic Products with the CNMI's: California, which has the world's fifth biggest economy, \$2.3 trillion; NJ, \$510.5 billion; MA, \$446.4 billion; NY, \$1.27 trillion; and RI, \$50.3 billion.

The CNMI's? \$1.2 billion.

The state of the local economy, in short, should be among the primary considerations when looking into the cost of any policy proposal.

If among the goals of paid family leave is to increase women workforce participation, then perhaps lawmakers should also find ways to allow the local economy to create more jobs for women and everyone else.

In any case, Rep. Sablan's thoughtful presentation is a much better approach to policy-making: there ought to be discussions, consultations, studies and research *before* introducing legislation.

Also worth looking into

AS in many policy issues such as paid family leave, even an expert's stance usually depends on his/her political leanings. In her 2018 research, Vanessa Brown Calder, policy analyst of the libertarian think tank Cato Institute (<https://www.cato.org/people/vanessa-calder>), stated that "evidence suggests government-supported leave may result in wage or benefit reductions, female unemployment, or reduced professional opportunities for women. Government intervention is also unlikely to correct gender or labor-market inequality in ways proponents desire. For example, families may respond to the policy by increasing women's household work contributions relative to men's. Redistributive effects of government intervention are likely to harm workers."

Ms Calder's study concludes that "policymakers should not adopt paid parental leave policies. Instead, they should consider improving workers' lives through reforms that increase economic efficiency, remove barriers to flexible work, and increase choice."