

Now That Kansas State Employees Get Parental Leave, Advocates Are Eyeing The Private Sector

Celia Llopis-Jepsen

January 20, 2019

Around 20,000 state employees in Kansas now qualify for paid parental leave.

Baby steps, say groups that advocate for families and women. They're celebrating, but they really want Kansas to join the six states and Washington D.C. that make private-sector companies give paid leave, too.

The Women's Foundation and Kansas Action for Children want paid family leave that Kansans can use for everything from bonding with babies to taking an elderly mom or dad to a doctor's appointment.

"Even a few weeks' flexibility," lobbyist Adrienne Olejnik says, can help parents in line for coveted slots at infant daycares. "It can then allow parents greater choice in where they end up putting their infant."

Her organization, Kansas Action, is revving up for a concerted push in the Statehouse in 2020. This year, staff will crisscross the state, talking to families and businesses in search of a sweet-spot proposal that could win broad support.

Critics will likely fight back.

In an email, Kansas Chamber spokeswoman Sherriene Jones-Sontag said the group's members "oppose any efforts to put Kansas employers at a disadvantage by placing costly mandates which go above and beyond what is required by federal law."

"Government should not," she added, "set personnel policies for (the) private sector."

Here's what Kansas does now, and what other states are doing:

On his way out the door, then-Gov. Jeff Colyer — quietly, some would argue — signed off on parental leave for more than 17,000 executive branch jobs. Up to six weeks of *full* pay. The judiciary followed suit.

Expect word from public universities as early as next month on whether they'll jump on the bandwagon. That would more than double the number of public employees in Kansas with access to paid leave.

Colyer's move puts Kansas in the company of six states with similar rules: Delaware, Indiana, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri and Virginia. Arkansas and Ohio offer their state employees a

more limited version. That's according to the Women's Foundation, which lobbied for Kansas to come on board.

Six states and D.C. have extended paid leave to the private sector:

- Rhode Island requires four weeks.
- California and New Jersey, six weeks.
- New York and D.C., eight weeks.
- Washington and Massachusetts, 12 weeks.

Of course, there's fine print. Not everyone qualifies, and the amount of reimbursable pay varies.

Nationally, most jobs come with unpaid family leave, though many families say they can't afford to use it. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates 15 percent of private-sector jobs come with a paid version.

Advocates of paid leave like to point out that the United States is the only industrialized country without a law requiring it. The Obama-era Department of Labor argued it could boost economic activity by \$500 billion a year because more women would get jobs.

Free-market researchers differ.

The Cato Institute warns workers could end up with lower wages, employers might lean toward hiring men, and families could redistribute more household work onto women. Women, employers might assume, are more likely to use the paid leave.

Cato also suggests far more companies may already offer paid parental leave than the federal government realizes.

No word yet from newly minted Gov. Laura Kelly on whether she would support a law on private-sector paid leave. Nor from the heads of the Kansas House and Senate.

But the Legislature could extend paid parental leave during this legislative session to its year-round employees (of which there are fewer than 100).

"This is important to us," House Speaker Ron Ryckman said at a recent legislative meeting on the logistics. "We're ready to take action when all of our i's are dotted and t's are crossed."

Recording of the legislative discussion (starting at 9 minutes 40 seconds).