



ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Wagner, Rubio push parental leave plans that would allow parents to tap Social Security early

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U.S. Rep. Ann Wagner said Thursday she hopes to get Democratic co-sponsors on legislation she is pushing to allow parents of newborns to take Social Security benefits early as paid family leave.

Wagner, R-Ballwin, and Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., held a news conference here to tout separate bills they plan to introduce that would take slightly different approaches, but are centered around one philosophy: Social Security benefits should be available for new parents in exchange for either a delay in retirement benefits or slightly lower benefits at retirement long enough to make up the money taken earlier for paid family leave.

Rubio is building his bill around the former, Wagner the latter. But both said their goals were to provide relief, at no further cost to taxpayers or new mandates on employers, for the 85 percent of American workers who currently do not receive paid family leave from their employers without raising taxes or creating a new bureaucracy.

The United States is the only industrialized nation in the world without paid parental leave.

President Donald Trump and his daughter, Ivanka, have made it a priority, and both Rubio and Wagner said Thursday that was an important factor in their efforts to get legislation passed.

“The White House is very much interested in the legislation that we have going forward,” Wagner said.

The proposal has sparked opposition from the right, with the libertarian Cato Institute calling it a well-intentioned plan that puts government more, not less, involved in family decisions.

And it comes in a year in which tax cuts given to American corporations and individuals by the GOP-controlled Congress have done little to reduce the percentage of Americans without paid parental leave.

One study this year said that only 13 percent of the corporate tax cuts were actually going to workers in bonuses, higher wages and other benefits, with \$171 billion going into stock buybacks by companies, a process which economists have said is one reason for a record-high stock market.

“We have to look at the 21st-century needs of the workforce,” Wagner said, adding that in the 1930s, when Social Security became law, only 1 in 5 women were in the workforce. Now, 1 in 2 are.

She called the approach she and Rubio are taking as a “strong conservative, out-of-the-box approach.”

Rubio said that “this idea wasn’t ready” during that tax-cut debate last year. The cuts passed without a single Democratic vote, and Democrats said they neglected the middle class in favor of the wealthy.

But both Rubio and Wagner said the boost to the economy from the tax-cut package has allowed them to come forward more confident that their proposal could pass a divided Congress. The government said last week that the economy grew at a 4.1 percent rate from April through June, fulfilling a Trump campaign promise.

They couched their proposals as part of a remake of the workforce to meet 21st century needs, and Wagner said their proposal is more possible with “sustained prosperity.”

Rubio said current paid leave tends to go to workers in higher-skilled, higher income fields, and he said the proposals would level the playing field for all workers.

“Half of the equation is in place, which is robust growth,” Rubio said. “We cannot have increased prosperity without the growth to produce it. What we need to be focusing on now is what do we do, from a public policy perspective, to ensure that it distributes in a way that leads to more equal opportunity.”

The proposal faces an uphill climb in this Congress, which is entering election season and has few days left on its legislative calendar. If it is pushed forward into a new Congress next year, election forecasts suggest there will be more Democrats, perhaps even a majority in the House or Senate, or both. Democrats who have been out front on this issue have suggested different ways to approach it, including taxes on employers and workers to pay for it.

“We really feel like this is an issue that is going to take some time to debate and explain to people,” Rubio said. “We’ve got some work to do. For the Republican Party, this is a new issue.”