

Government Executive

Generous Paid Family Leave, Job Satisfaction, the Pay Debate and More

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The District of Columbia's government this week took a step toward what would be the most **generous paid family leave** policy in the country, but the benefit would only help some federal employees and federal contractors. A majority of the D.C. Council supports legislation introduced Tuesday that would grant part- and full-time workers in the city **16 weeks of paid leave** to recover from an illness or a military deployment or to care for a new child or a sick parent, *The Washington Post reported*.

Workers making up to \$52,000 annually would receive their full salary for 16 weeks. Those above that threshold would receive \$1,000 per week, plus half of their additional income, up to a limit of \$3,000 weekly. The benefit would be paid for through a tax on D.C. employers.

So what's the catch? The District cannot force the federal government to participate, so federal employees who live in Maryland and Virginia would be out luck, and feds or federal contractors who live in D.C. could **opt into the program** but would have to pay a "small fee," the *Post* said.

Depending on exactly how big that fee is, the new policy could still be a substantial improvement for District-dwelling feds. Currently, feds can take up to 12 weeks off to care for a new child, but that leave is unpaid. President Obama in January ordered federal agencies to advance employees up to six weeks of paid sick leave to care for an ill family member or new child. He also asked Congress to pass legislation giving feds an additional six weeks of paid administrative leave for the birth or adoption of a child.

Lawmakers heeded Obama's call by introducing bills in both the House (H.R. 532) and Senate (S. 2033), but so far neither has come up for a vote in committee. Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., sponsor of the House bill, first started introducing paid parental leave legislation more than 15 years ago, and so far the efforts have been fruitless. The District's policy might be feds' best chance yet of seeing additional paid benefits.

Meanwhile, there is some bad news for federal employees with same-sex domestic partners on the health insurance front. The Office of Personnel Management has reversed a policy that allowed unmarried federal employees and retirees with domestic partners to **enroll their partners' children in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program** and the Federal Dental and Vision Insurance program, the *Post reports*.

The benefit was available the children of domestic partners in states that did not recognize same sex marriage, and couples had to certify that they would marry if allowed. Now that states are required to recognize same sex marriages, the policy is no longer necessary, OPM said. Federal employees or retirees who wish to continue covering the children of their domestic partners past the end of the 2015 plan year must get married.

On a much broader level, federal employees appear to be slightly **happier with their jobs and pay** than they were last year. The “global satisfaction” score on the annual Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey rose to 60 percent in 2015, an increase of 1 percentage point from 59 percent the previous year, OPM announced. That score measures views on pay, individual jobs and the overall organization.

According to the conservative Cato Institute, feds have every reason to be happy, at least when it comes to compensation. The think tank released a new study adding fuel to the long-running debate over **how federal employees’ pay stacks up with that of their private sector peers**. Cato’s Chris Edwards found that the average federal employee earns about \$119,000 annually in pay and benefits, compared to the private sector worker who earns \$67,000 per year. When comparing just salaries, feds collect 50 percent bigger paychecks.

As with past studies finding feds are overcompensated, the Cato report does not account for any fundamental differences in the demographics of the federal workforce or the work it does. Several other studies have tried to take those factors into account, but the Government Accountability Office has found there is really no perfect way to compare federal and private sector compensation. At the other end of the spectrum in **public-private wage gap** studies, the Federal Salary Council, a group made up of union representatives and pay experts that advises the President’s Pay Agent, has consistently found federal workers are severely underpaid compared to the private sector.

Regardless of where the truth lies, the leaders of the **Combined Federal Campaign**, which started last month, are hoping that feds will feel more generous this year than they have in the recent past. Contributions to the campaign have been falling since 2009, according to the *Washington Post*, and CIA Director John O. Brennan, the honorary national CFC director, has called on employees to step up this year.

“I think part of this is an issue of awareness,” Brennan told the *Post*. “I don’t think federal employees are less interested in contributing to charities. We want them to know that within their workplace they now have the ability to contribute as they can to whatever charities they might want in a very easy manner, to include with regular payroll deductions.”

One organization that participates in the CFC is the **Federal Employee Education and Assistance Fund**. Among other types of assistance, the fund provides grants to federal employees who have been affected by natural disasters, such as the recent **flooding in South Carolina** and along the Southeast coast. Click here for more information on how to apply for a grant or donate. Retirees who are members of the National Association of Retired Employees can also apply for disaster relief grants of up to \$500 per family through a NARFE-FEEA partnership.