

WORLD

Paid family leave is gaining traction

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JP Morgan Chase, one of the largest banks in the United States, will now pay for employees to travel out of state to get an abortion. The company has joined a score of others that include Disney, Johnson and Johnson, Amazon, and Starbucks.

“Our health care plans have historically covered travel benefits for certain covered services that would require travel,” the company said. “Beginning in July, we will expand this benefit to include all covered services that can only be obtained far from your home, which would include legal abortion.”

Conspicuously absent was any mention of paid family leave. Laura Echevarria is the communications director for National Right to Life. “If a company’s going to come out with press releases about paying for abortion travel, why are they not just as vocal about saying we’re going to do paid family leave?” she asked. National Right to Life is one of a growing number of conservative and pro-life politicians and groups that are taking a fresh look at paid family leave policies. But experts disagree on the best approach.

The United States is one of only a few countries without some kind of government-funded paid family leave, and some Americans do not have access to paid family leave through their employer. Supporters of paid leave programs argue they both improve the well-being of families and boost the participation of women in the workforce.

Nine states and the District of Columbia have government-funded programs in place. According to a Cato Institute report, access to paid family leave has grown steadily, and over 100 large companies have expanded their policies since 2015. A competitive labor market has also spurred companies to provide more programs.

On Nov. 19, the U.S. The House of Representatives passed the Build Back Better Act that would provide up to four weeks of paid caregiving leave, but the bill failed to gain a majority in the Senate. (The act initially proposed 12 weeks). The bill was the first expansion of leave benefits for private workers since the Family and Medical Leave Act passed in 1993, which guarantees 12 weeks of unpaid leave for the birth/adoption of a child or caregiving for a family member with a serious health condition.

Though the act passed the House on party lines (no Republicans voted in favor of the bill), a growing number of Republican politicians and conservative, pro-life organizations argue paid family leave will bolster the pro-life position.

Following the *Dobbs v Jackson* Supreme Court decision, Republican Sen. Marco Rubio released the “Pro Family Framework” proposal, an initiative that expands the child care tax credit to

include “unborn children” and includes the New Parents Act, which gives families paid leave by letting parents take money from their future social security payments. “We need to adopt pro-life policies that support families, rather than destroy them,” he said.

Iowa Republican Sen. Charles Grassley told Axios, “Now that Roe has been overturned, we have to be more supportive of families and mothers.”

While defending her state’s abortion ban, South Dakota Republican Gov. Kristi Noem told CNN “the time is right” for paid family leave. “That’s a discussion we’re going to have,” she said. “I think it’s important that we back up ... that we want stronger families.”

Last Wednesday, the Center for Public Justice, a faith-based, nonpartisan policy research organization, held the latest in a series of paid family leave advocacy training over Zoom. One-hundred and twenty six people attended, roughly four times the attendance of their first session in May. “I have very much observed the *Dobbs* decision marking a change in attention to family supportive policies like paid family leave,” said Rachel Anderson, a resident fellow at the center.

The center is calling on the U.S. government to establish a universal paid benefit for both new parents and end of life caregivers for at least 12 weeks. “Addressing the need for paid family leave [is] really in line with our Christian commitment to value the family and to value life in all of its stages,” said Anderson.

But some experts argue more government intervention will not actually help families. “What often happens is that you design a government program and it has to be one size fits all,” said Rachel Greszler, a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation. To protect from fraud and abuse, these programs must put many rules and regulations in place. The result is that they are no longer “flexible and accommodating” for families, she argued. Greszler fears that a federal program would crowd out more flexible, private programs since companies will be forced to comply.

Greszler says legislation like the Working Families Flexibility Act proposed by Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, recognizes that no two situations are identical, and it does a better job of helping families. The act allows individuals who work overtime to choose between monetary compensation or comp time.

In Wisconsin, the leading Republican primary contender for governor, Tim Michels, said he would sign legislation that requires employers to provide parental leave. Gracie Skogman is the legislative director of Wisconsin Right to Life. She argued that government-funded paid family leave could be part of a larger umbrella that protects families and helps women choose life. But the help can’t stop there.

Skogman believes that pregnancy resource centers that provide daycare and other resources are better equipped to help women than government agencies. The centers get to know each family and its unique scenario. “I think those types of initiatives probably fill the needs for women more directly and efficiently,” she said.

