



Written Testimony of Jeffrey Levi, PhD

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Balancing Work and Family: What Policies Best Support American Families?

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Trust for America's Health (TFAH), a national non-profit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to saving lives by protecting the health of every community and working to make disease prevention a national priority, is pleased to provide the Subcommittee with our views on workplace policies that support American families.

The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 allowed employees to take unpaid leave due to illness, the birth of a child or to care for a sick family member. It was an important first step in recognizing the need to balance family and work commitments. Increasingly in today's workplace, both parents work; yet 48 percent of private sector workers do not have paid sick days, and over 75 percent of workers in the lowest quartile of annual earnings do not have paid sick leave. As a result, some parents must either forgo income to care for a loved one or attend work while they or a family member is sick.

Policies that best support American families also support public health. When employees with a contagious disease go to work, they put all of their co-workers at risk for contracting an infection. Reports have indicated that approximately 80 percent of food service employees do not have paid sick leave, which poses the risk of infecting other employees and customers. Across the U.S., 59 million workers do not have paid sick leave, and 89 million Americans do not have paid sick leave that they can use to care for immediate family members. Paid sick and family leave policies are essential for containing the spread of infectious disease and limiting the risk of illness, especially during public health emergencies.

With this in mind, TFAH supports the Healthy Families Act, which would require employers with 15 or more employees to offer seven paid sick days each year, which could be used to meet their own medical needs or to care for sick family members. This bill would go a long way toward helping parents to balance work and the need to care for their families and would also help support a healthy workforce. However, seven days of paid sick leave may not be enough to minimize the spread of disease during a public health emergency such as a potential pandemic flu outbreak, during which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) encourages exposed individuals to self-quarantine for at least two weeks.

Experts predict a new flu pandemic will emerge three to four times each century. The 1918 pandemic resulted in approximately 50 million deaths worldwide. Health officials are concerned that the H5N1 strain of the avian flu could mutate into a strain against which humans have no natural resistance. In the event of a severe pandemic, as many as 90 million Americans could become sick, including an estimated 20 percent of those who work.

Since effective vaccines will probably not be available for six to eight months after the initial detection of a flu pandemic, other measures, such as social distancing, will need to be employed in order to control the spread of a pandemic. A recent study of the 1918 pandemic flu outbreak found that social distancing measures implemented in the early part of a wave led to significantly lower death rates. In fact, the CDC has proposed that household members of those who are sick stay home until the person is no longer ill and

has also suggested that schools could potentially close during a pandemic, which would leave parents to struggle with balancing work and childcare.

A pandemic flu or other widespread infectious disease outbreak would put a tremendous strain on our public health system and on families. TFAH believes that the federal government should offer compensation to individuals who stay home during a pandemic because they have become ill or live with someone who is ill. The Department of Labor's Disaster Unemployment Assistance program provides financial assistance to individuals who are not eligible for regular unemployment benefits and whose employment or self-employment has been lost or interrupted as a direct result of a major disaster declared by the President. TFAH believes that this program should be expanded and modified to provide some level of compensation for individuals without paid leave who are sick from or exposed to pandemic flu or another life threatening infectious disease outbreak. The purpose of this compensation benefit is to encourage exposed individuals to stay at home and minimize the spread of the disease, thereby reducing the health care costs and loss of life associated with a pandemic. TFAH strongly supports the expansion of this, or a similar mechanism, during a pandemic in order to best protect the public's health and enable families to care for one another.

Creating policies that encourage sick individuals to stay home is an essential part of maintaining a healthy and productive workforce. Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important issue.