



**Written Testimony of Steffany Stern, Work and Family Policy Analyst, National Partnership for Women & Families
on the Alaska Paid Sick and Safe Days Bill, SB 86**

**Hearing of the Alaska Senate Labor and Commerce Committee
March 10, 2009**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding the Alaska Paid Sick and Safe Days Bill, SB 86. The National Partnership is a non-profit, non-partisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, access to quality health care, and policies that help workers in the United States meet the dual responsibilities of work and family.

One of our proudest accomplishments is leading a nationwide movement to ensure that all workers are guaranteed paid sick days to use when they are ill or need to care for a sick family member. We lead a broad, diverse coalition of over 150 groups dedicated to advocating for paid sick days at the federal level. We also support advocates working at the state and city levels to advance paid sick days initiatives through their local legislative bodies and through the ballot.

It is an honor to testify today in support of SB 86, groundbreaking yet modest legislation to allow Alaska workers at larger businesses to earn one hour of paid sick and safe time per 40 hours worked. This bill represents an excellent step toward updating labor standards to better reflect the realities of today's working families. Alaska has an important opportunity to strengthen its reputation as a leader in addressing the needs of working families and promoting economic security by passing SB 86.

Everyone Gets Sick. Not Everyone Has Time to Get Better.

Chances are each of us will get sick or need to care for a sick family member this year. But not all of us have the option to take time off from work to get better. In the U.S. today, nearly half of private sector workers (48 percent) do not have a single paid sick day to use for themselves or to care for a family member.¹ In Alaska, an estimated 110,000 private sector workers—49 percent of the workforce—are not able to take a paid sick day when they are ill.² The situation is even worse for low-income workers: more than three in four (79 percent) have no paid sick days at all.³ And 94 million hard-working people do not have a single paid sick day they can use to care for a sick child.⁴

¹ Vicky Lovell, Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2007.

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2007.

³ Lovell, 2007

⁴ Lovell, 2007

Let's put a face on some of those statistics:

I work for a small, family-owned company that offers no benefits other than free coffee and discounts on food. It is difficult to be there when someone has to come to work sick so that they can make ends meet. On the other hand, I had a job in the past with the federal government, and my supervisor encouraged us to go home to take care of our sick children, or if we weren't feeling well. I've seen both ends of the spectrum. I believe we need a system where parents can take care of themselves and their children, when needed.”

— Nelle, Haines, Alaska

Currently, no state or federal law ensures that workers have paid sick days when they need them. In 2006, San Francisco became the first locality in the nation to guarantee paid sick days for all its workers. Since then, a paid sick days movement has grown around the country. Washington, DC became the second jurisdiction to adopt paid sick days in March 2008, and the first to guarantee paid “safe days” for use by victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking. In November 2008, paid sick days were put to a vote on the Milwaukee ballot, and voters passed the measure with an overwhelming 69% of the vote, enacting a law that provides paid sick and safe days for all workers in the city. Legislators in more than a dozen states as well as on Capitol Hill are advocating for paid sick days initiatives in 2009, and we are hearing that several new campaigns are launching this year as well.

The National Partnership is leading a coalition in support of the federal paid sick days bill, the Healthy Families Act. This diverse coalition includes children's, civil rights, women's, disability, faith-based, community and anti-poverty groups as well as labor unions, health agencies and leading researchers at top academic institutions. It includes 9to5, ACORN, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, AFL-CIO, National Organization for Women, and numerous other large, well-respected organizations. We have come together in support of this bill because millions of working people are being forced to choose between taking care of a sick child or family member and losing a day's pay – or even losing a job. In a nation that values families, no worker should have to make this impossible choice.

Americans want to be responsible workers *and* be able to care for their families. In 78 percent of today's families, both parents work for pay – and the typical couple in America now works close to 90 hours per week. But our policies lag desperately behind – and families are struggling as a result. We can and must do better – and we will, if we truly value families.

Lack of Paid Sick Days Hits Low-Wage Workers Hardest

When a low-wage worker gets sick, or needs to take care of a sick child or take an elderly parent to a medical appointment, he or she is faced with an impossible choice: lose a day of pay and possibly even a job, or take time to care for your family. Half of low-wage working parents report losing pay to stay home and care for a sick child or being forced to leave children home alone.⁵ In the wealthiest nation in the world, these are choices no parent should have to make.

⁵Jody Heymann, *Forgotten Families*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

Low-wage workers without paid sick days typically have little or no savings to fall back on when they need time off. For example, a survey of New York residents found that 71 percent of low-income workers report having less than \$500 in savings, and 52% of those workers report having less than \$100 in savings.⁶ When sick workers have little savings, they are especially vulnerable to extreme financial crises and even bankruptcy. One study found that nearly two million Americans experience medical bankruptcy annually, even though 75 percent of those surveyed had health insurance at the onset of illness. Respondents reported that illness and medical bills were the cause of 46.2 percent of their personal bankruptcies.⁷

Paid Sick Days are Good for Children

Children inevitably get sick. On average, school-age children miss at least three school days per year due to health issues, and younger children have even higher rates of illness.⁸ Providing workers with paid sick days that can be used to care for a sick child has a positive impact on children's health. Studies show that children recover from illness faster when their parents care for them,⁹ and that having paid time off is a primary factor in a parent's decision to stay home when a child is sick.¹⁰ Having access to paid sick days also increases the likelihood that working parents can take children for the preventive care and well-child visits that can help keep kids from getting sick or forestall more serious illness.

Paid Sick Days Help Workers Care for Older Relatives

Many workers today care for older relatives, and many more will be caring for them in the near future as Baby Boomers age. In 2000, 12.6 percent of the population was over 65 years old; by 2030, Americans over age 65 will comprise 20 percent of the population.¹¹ Studies have shown that more than one-third of Americans (35 percent), both women and men, have significant eldercare responsibilities, and many are forced to reduce their work hours or take time off to provide care.¹² Providing access to family-flexible sick leave is a critical strategy for helping working families deal with the needs of their aging relatives.

Women are Disproportionately Affected by the Failure to Provide Paid Sick Days

The lack of paid sick days has a significant impact on working women, and is particularly threatening to women's economic security. Women still are predominantly responsible for family caretaking. Many working women have children, and one in three has additional caretaking responsibilities for an elderly relative, a person with a disability, or a special needs child.¹³

Staggering statistics demonstrate the hardship that can be associated with women's caretaking responsibilities: half of working mothers miss work when a child comes down with a common

⁶ Community Service Society and Lake Snell Perry & Associates, *The Unheard Third 2005: Bringing the Voices of Low-Income New Yorkers to the Policy Debate*, 2005.

⁷ David Himmelstein, Elizabeth Warren, Deborah Thorne, and Steffie Woolhandler, *Illness and Injury As Contributors to Bankruptcy*, Health Affairs Market Watch, 2 February 2005.

⁸ Vicky Lovell, *No Time to be Sick*.

⁹ S. J. Heymann, Alison Earle, and Brian Egleston, 1996, as cited in Lovell, *Paid Sick Days Improve Public Health by Reducing the Spread of Disease*, Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2006.

¹⁰ Jody Heymann, *The Widening Gap*.

¹¹ Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging, *Statistics on the Aging Population*, 2006.

¹² Families and Work Institute, *Highlights of the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce*, 2002.

¹³ Jody Heymann, *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families Are in Jeopardy—and What Can Be Done About It*, Basic Books, 2000.

illness.¹⁴ Many of these women—two-thirds of low-income mothers and one-third of middle- and upper-income mothers¹⁵—lose pay to care for their sick children. That is a significant financial blow for many low- and moderate-income women and their families, for whom even one day's pay can mean the difference between being able to pay the rent or buy groceries, especially in these difficult economic times.

Women also are disproportionately impacted by the lack of a standard of paid sick days because of the types of jobs they hold. Only 16 percent of part-time workers have paid sick days, compared to 60 percent of full-time workers,¹⁶ and women are more likely to work part-time (or cobble together full-time hours by working more than one part-time position) than men. Similarly, accommodation and food service industry jobs include almost no paid sick time, and the majority of those workers (53 percent) are women.¹⁷ Women also are disproportionately represented among low-wage workers, the population least likely to have access to paid sick days: three in five minimum wage workers (59 percent) are women.¹⁸

Further, women's dual commitments to work and family can negatively affect their career paths and income stability if they lack paid sick days they can use to care for family members. One study found that being female doubles the chance of experiencing job loss because of family illness.¹⁹

Older Workers Also Need Paid Sick Days

Roughly half of Americans 65 years or older participate in the labor force,²⁰ and this number is expected to increase as the nation ages and more workers delay retirement for economic or other reasons. Many of these workers will require time away from work to care for their own health or to care for an older spouse or other family member.

Establishing a Minimum Standard of Paid Sick Days is Good for Public Health

Paid sick days are essential to ensuring that workers don't have to risk their own or the public's health because they can't afford to take a sick day. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) strongly urges us to stay home from work, school, and social gatherings when we are sick and, not surprisingly, the CDC encourages parents to keep sick children home from school and daycare to avoid the spread of illness.²¹ But workers without paid sick days don't have the option to do so, and we all suffer as a result.

Workers in direct contact with the public every day are the least likely to have paid sick days. Seventy-eight percent of food and public accommodation workers have no paid sick days, and most workers in child care centers, retail, and nursing homes also lack paid sick days.²² Nobody wants a sick worker sneezing in their food, passing illness at the store, or infecting children and

14 Kaiser Family Foundation, *Women Work and Family Health: A Balancing Act*, Issue Brief, April 2003.

15 Kaiser Family Foundation, *Women, Work and Family Health: A Balancing Act*.

16 Vicky Lovell, *No Time to be Sick*.

17 Lovell, *No Time to be Sick*.

18 Economic Policy Institute, *Minimum Wage Issue Guide*, http://www.epi.org/publications/minimum_wage_issue_guide, 2007.

19 Spilerman and Schrank, *Responses to the intrusion of family responses in the workplace*, *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 10, 27-61, 1991.

20 AARP Public Policy Institute, *Update on the Aged 55+ Worker*, 2005.

21 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/symptoms.htm> and <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/professionals/infectioncontrol/childcaresettings.htm>

22 Lovell, 2007.

seniors. Similarly, it benefits no one when sick children come to school or day care, risking infecting those around them. When workers cannot stay home when they are sick or need to care for a sick child or family member, we are all at risk.

Giving workers paid sick days makes it possible for them to seek the medical help they or a family member needs. It also removes a key barrier to health care access, making it possible for them to seek preventive care. Preventive care is essential to improving workers' overall health and decreasing the number of avoidable hospitalizations, thus decreasing health care costs. Many people with chronic illnesses, such as asthma or diabetes, could avoid hospitalization if they were able to attend outpatient visits to manage their conditions.

Survivors of Domestic Violence, Stalking and Sexual Assault Need Paid Sick and Safe Days
Approximately 7.6 million people per year are the victims of intimate partner violence.²³ In 2006, 260,940 people were raped or sexually assaulted.²⁴ Paid sick and safe days would ensure that all survivors of domestic violence, stalking or sexual assault are guaranteed paid sick time when they need it most: to address a violent situation and access necessary recovery services without risking their jobs or their paycheck.

Paid sick and safe days would help survivors by protecting their paycheck and jobs when they need to take time from work for recovery purposes. One of the key reasons survivors of domestic violence stay with their abusers is financial dependence.²⁵ They may stay because leaving means losing their housing, health care, or income. It is essential that survivors be able to seek out shelter, file restraining orders, attend court dates, or receive counseling to prevent further abuse and work disruption—*without* losing income or their jobs. Without paid sick and safe days, victims of domestic violence and sexual assault are forced to lose days of paid employment because of the violence they face, and are in grave danger of losing their jobs. In fact, the General Accounting Office found that 25 - 50% of domestic violence victims reported losing a job due, at least in part, to domestic violence.²⁶ Without their jobs, many victims feel they have no choice but to return to, or remain in, the abusive situation.

Paid Sick Days are Good for the U.S. Economy

Providing paid sick days for workers produces benefits beyond those that accrue to individual workers, children and seniors, or even our national public health. Healthy workers are critical to a productive and vibrant economy. Employers and our economy would benefit substantially if workers had a minimum guarantee of paid sick days.

Ill workers who have no paid sick days go to work sick and spread illness to colleagues, lowering the overall productivity of the workplace. More than half of human resources executives (56 percent) report that “presenteeism”—employees’ practice of coming to work even though they

²³ Department of Justice, *National Violence Against Women Survey*, 2000. www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/pubs-sum/181867.htm.

²⁴ Criminal Victimization in the United States, 2006. <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/cvus06.pdf>

²⁵ D.C. Coalition Against Domestic Violence, *Paid Safe Days Benefit Both Domestic Violence Victims and Employers*, 2007. <http://www.dccadv.org/docs/PaidSafeDaysFactSheet.pdf>; National Task Force to End Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women, *Economic Security VAWA Factsheet*, 2005. <http://www.endabuse.org/vawa/factsheets/EconomicSecurity.pdf>.

²⁶ United States General Accounting Office, *Domestic Violence: Prevalence and Implications for Employment Among Welfare Recipients*, at 8 (November 1998) <http://www.gao.gov/archive/1999/he99012.pdf>.

are sick—is a problem in their companies.²⁷ Studies have shown that presenteeism costs our nation’s economy \$180 billion in lost productivity annually.²⁸ When workers are guaranteed a minimum number of paid sick days, employers benefit as healthier workers are more productive and the spread of illness in the workplace is reduced.

Employers reap the savings from reduced turnover as well. Turnover-related costs (which include advertising for, interviewing, and training replacements) are substantial—generally far greater than the cost of providing paid sick time to retain existing workers. A cost-benefit analysis of the Healthy Families Act demonstrates that if workers had just seven paid sick days per year, our national economy would experience a net savings of \$8.2 billion per year due to decreased turnover, higher productivity, and reduction in the spread of contagion in the workplace.²⁹

The United States lags far behind the rest of the world in providing paid leave benefits. A recent study by Dr. Jody Heymann of Harvard and McGill Universities highlights just how far the U.S. lags behind other nations, including those with some of the strongest economies in the world: at least 145 nations provide paid time off for short- or long-term illnesses, and 127 of those nations guarantee a week or more of paid sick days per year to their workforce. Workers receive paid time off in every one of the top ten most economically competitive nations in the world, with the glaring exception of the U.S.³⁰

We are familiar with the arguments against establishing a minimum labor standard for paid sick days, because we heard them all in the fight to enact the FMLA. We are convinced that they are specious scare tactics; there are simply no objective studies that conclude that providing good working conditions leads to job loss, or that these protections are in any way linked to higher unemployment.³¹ The statistics, and the experience of other economic powerhouse nations, clearly demonstrate that these arguments are not based in reality.

Paid Sick Days are Critically Important During an Economic Downturn

Working people all across the nation are facing financial uncertainty. Losing pay for missing a day, or even a few hours, of work can be a blow to family budgets, which are already stretched to the limits. And losing a job due to unavoidable missed work for illness or caring for a family member can mean financial catastrophe. In a recent poll, one in six respondents reported that they or a family member had been fired, suspended, punished or threatened with being fired for taking time off due to personal illness or to care for a sick child or relative.³² Now, more than ever, we need to protect working families’ economic security by ensuring they do not lose pay or a job when they take needed time away from work.

The Public Overwhelmingly Supports Paid Sick Days

27 CCH Incorporated, 2006 CCH Unscheduled Absence Survey, October 2006.

28 Ron Goetzal et al., *Health Absence, Disability, and Presenteeism Cost Estimates of Certain Physical and Mental Health Conditions Affecting U.S. Employers*, Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, April 2004.

29 Vicky Lovell, *Valuing Good Health: An Estimate of Costs and Savings for the Healthy Families Act*, Institute of Women’s Policy Research, 2005.

30 Jody Heymann, Alison Earle, and Jeffrey Hayes, Project on Global Working Families, *The Work, Family, and Equity Index: How Does the United States Measure Up?*, 2007.

31 Jody Heymann, Alison Earle, and Jeffrey Hayes, Project on Global Working Families, *The Work, Family, and Equity Index: How Does the United States Measure Up?*, 2007.

32 National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, *Paid Sick Days: A Basic Labor Standard for the 21st Century*, August 2008.

The likelihood of being sick—or of having a child who will get sick—does not depend on whether you live in a blue or a red or a purple state, so establishing a minimum standard of paid sick days deserves bipartisan support. It has it. Poll after poll finds tremendous support for paid sick days and proposals like SB 86. A 2008 nationwide poll found that nearly nine in ten people surveyed (86 percent) said that they favor a basic labor standard of paid sick days.³³ And two in three respondents said that they are concerned about not having paid sick days. Support for paid sick days holds across party and demographic lines: 94 percent of liberals and 81 percent of conservatives agree that paid sick days is a “basic workplace standard,” and strong majorities of both men and women support paid sick days.³⁴

Conclusion

This debate is really about what we value in this nation. If we want healthy families and a strong economy, if we care about the well-being and economic security of our families, we will establish a minimum standard of paid sick days. Alaska can do that by passing SB 86.

Guaranteeing access to paid sick days is the next step in bringing our outdated workplace policies back in sync with the realities of life for our families. Paid sick days are the next minimum labor standard Alaska, and the nation, need.

Momentum is building. At the federal level, the Senate held a hearing on the Healthy Families Act in the 110th Congress, and the bill is likely to have additional movement in the 111th Congress. And in 2009, paid sick days bills will be considered in legislatures in Alaska, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Vermont, New York City, and Philadelphia. But we urgently need a state to step forward and enact the first statewide standard guaranteeing all its workers paid sick days. The people of Alaska need you to make passage of paid sick and safe days a priority in this legislative session. Members of the Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important discussion.

³³ National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, *Paid Sick Days: A Basic Labor Standard for the 21st Century*. August 2008.

³⁴ National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, *Paid Sick Days: A Basic Labor Standard for the 21st Century*. August 2008