

# **Senators Call On Congressional Leadership To Prioritize Comprehensive National Paid Leave Program In Build Back Better Package**

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) and U.S. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL) joined U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) in

sending a letter to President Biden, U.S. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-CA-12) to reinforce the critical need for the inclusion of a federal paid family and medical leave program in Build Back Better legislation currently being negotiated in Congress.

“We urge you to include a national paid leave program that is meaningful, comprehensive and permanent in the Build Back Better Act,” the Senators wrote. “It must be universal to cover all workers, provide progressive wage replacement to help the lowest wage earners, and cover all existing types of leave with parity. This is one of our top policy priorities in this historic legislation. Just as we need roads and bridges, we need paid leave along with affordable and accessible child care and the expanded child tax credit, to ensure our families have a full range of needed supports.”

They continued: “Paid leave is a critical policy to improve the economic security of families, support businesses, and increase economic growth. The pandemic has exposed an acute emergency on top of an ongoing, chronic caregiving crisis for working people and employers alike. We cannot emerge from this crisis and remain one of the only countries in the world with no form of national paid leave. Now is the time to make a bold and robust investment in our nation’s working families.”

Despite the universal need, only 23% of working people in the United States have access to paid leave through their employer, and just 8% of lower-wage workers have access to even a single day of paid family leave. Rural communities especially lack access to paid family leave, with rural women being significantly less likely to be offered paid family leave or maternity leave by their employers than their urban and suburban counterparts.

Additionally, millions of families are just one unexpected bill away from financial emergency and because they lack paid leave, are forced into impossible choices between losing their jobs and being able to care for themselves and their families. More than 2.5 million women left the U.S. workforce during the pandemic, and women lost nearly a million more jobs than men in 2020. Many have been forced to leave due to family considerations, including increased responsibilities as caregivers or because they work in industries that have been among the hardest hit. These losses are disproportionately felt by Black and Latina women.

Along with Duckworth, Durbin and Gillibrand, U.S. Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Cory Booker (D-NJ), Ben Cardin (D-MD), Maggie Hassan (D-NH), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Alex Padilla (D-CA), Jacky Rosen (D-NV), Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), Tina Smith (D-MN) and Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) also joined the letter.

Both Duckworth and Durbin are cosponsors of Gillibrand and U.S. Representative Rosa DeLauro's (D-CT) [\*Family and Medical Insurance Leave \(FAMILY\) Act\*](#), which would create a permanent, national paid family and medical leave program.

Full text of the letter can be found [here](#) and below.

Dear President Biden, Speaker Pelosi and Leader Schumer,

As Congress continues to work with the Biden-Harris Administration on the Build Back Better American Families Plan infrastructure package, we write to reinforce the critical need for a federal paid family and medical leave program that will create meaningful economic security for all Americans and their families as we continue to recover from the health and economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We urge you to include a national paid leave program that is meaningful, comprehensive and permanent in the Build Back Better Act. It must be universal to cover all workers, provide progressive wage replacement to help the lowest wage earners, and cover all existing types of leave with parity. This is one of our top policy priorities in this historic legislation. Just as we need roads and bridges, we need paid leave *along* with affordable and accessible child care *and* the expanded child tax credit, to ensure our families have a full range of needed supports.

Paid leave is a critical policy to improve the economic security of families, support businesses, and increase economic growth. The pandemic has exposed an acute emergency on top of an ongoing, chronic caregiving crisis for working people and employers alike. We cannot emerge from this crisis and remain one of the only countries in the world with no form of national paid leave. Now is the time to make a bold and robust investment in our nation's working families.

The Build Back Better package must include a national paid leave program that covers all workers because, at one point or another, nearly everyone will need to take leave from work to give or receive care, whether it's to welcome a new child, be there for an aging parent or loved one, or to recover from their own major surgery, serious illness like cancer or substance use disorders. Despite the universal need, only 23 percent of working people in this country have access to paid leave through their employer, and lower-wage workers are the least likely to have access with just 7 percent of low-wage workers having access to even a single day of paid family leave. Millions of families are just one unexpected bill away from financial emergency, and a lack of paid leave forces people into impossible choices between losing their jobs and income and being able to care for themselves and their families.

The lack of paid leave is not only a concern for working families; it is also a concern for the business community, in particularly small businesses, as we have now seen more than two million women leave the workforce since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 650 companies are publicly calling for national paid leave policy because they know that paid leave helps businesses. Paid leave has been proven to increase worker retention, reduce turnover, and improve productivity. A recent study showed that women with access to paid leave are 40% more likely to return to work after giving birth than those without access. Older adults caring for loved ones in states with paid leave are more likely to return to work after using paid leave for a period of family caregiving, and workers with paid leave can recover and return more easily from their own serious health issue. In addition, paid leave helps level the playing field for small businesses and startups, which too often struggle to attract top talent because they can't afford to compete with larger employers' paid leave benefits. Nationwide, 70% of small businesses support the creation of a national paid leave program.

Paid leave is a key element of addressing racial, class, and gender inequalities in the United States. Paid leave is a racial justice policy – workers of color are less likely to have paid leave at work, suffer the health disparities that have resulted from systemic injustices and often have multi-generational caregiving responsibilities. It is also a gender justice policy: women are more likely to leave work to provide care to children and to older adults and less likely than men to have paid leave when they need time away to care. A national paid leave program will also help ensure that we are prepared for the demographic changes of the years ahead: U.S. Census data from 2019 shows that more than one in every seven Americans is 65 and older. With an aging U.S. population, eldercare is a growing responsibility for Americans. Many workers are faced with the dual responsibility of caring for an elderly family member as well as young children -- and most have no access to paid leave.

The benefits of a national paid leave policy are clear, and Americans across the political spectrum recognize this. Paid leave is overwhelmingly popular: 84% of voters support a national paid leave program -- including 74% of Republicans. The American public is aligned on the need, and it's time for us to deliver on this critical promise to families.

There is no lasting recovery — no real rebuilding — without care. Paid leave is a necessary and long overdue investment that would contribute to adding more than \$1.6 trillion to our economy through increased women's workforce participation. An investment in paid leave will pay dividends for our families, our businesses, and our economy, while creating a more equitable recovery for all. We cannot afford to wait.