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EDITORIALS

Effective way to fund paid family leave

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This page has been a longtime supporter of paid family leave for employees who need to care for either a sick relative or a newborn. But although the state, through the federal government's Family and Medical Leave Act, has been generous in granting unpaid leave for family emergencies, periodic attempts to fund the leave have all failed due to worry about costs and lobbying from business interests. At long last, however, there is a new push for legislation, a push that seems to answer the primary concern of businesses.

Legislation has been proposed by state Sen. Stephen M. Sweeney, an agile-thinking Democrat who earlier this year gained notoriety when, as a union leader, he pushed a bill that would have retracted some benefits for state workers. This time out, Sweeney suggests that employees cover the cost of the program through a .1 percent tax on their wages; the program would become part of, and run similarly to, the state's disability program, which workers also pay for. Like that program, this would offer workers two-thirds of their salary, as much as \$488 per week, for up to 12 weeks of leave. A .1 percent tax would cost someone who makes \$80,000 a year \$80 over the course of that year.

A push for such legislation coincides with a statewide survey that found that 78 percent of New Jerseyans, or eight out of every 10, support paid family leave. Just 16 percent are opposed to it.

The support isn't surprising. No matter how giant our ambitions, how great our dedication to career, we are humans first, employees second. Virtually all of us have family members who depend on us, be they young children, aging parents or ailing spouses. Many of us know what it is like to be caught between our duties to our employer and a needy family member. There is a chronic tension between those duties; every once in a while, however, our family duties must trump.

A just and caring society needs to find a way to let people tend to those crises because it is the right thing to do. But it also is probably the smart thing to do. Dozens of studies have shown that happy workers are more productive workers; this bill is about easing tensions and building the happiness quotient. And as is the case with so many rights issues that are fought because they seem too expensive, this benefit is likely to cost less than anticipated and to give back as much as it costs. The survey of New Jerseyans found that fewer than one in four workers actually had taken family leave within the previous five years, and the largest percentage of those workers had taken less than two weeks away.

There was a great hue and cry from businesses before unpaid family leave went into effect over worries that an employees' absence would lose money for the company or cause it to pay more in overtime to other employees. But the fallout, if any, has been minimal.

In its 14 years of its existence, unpaid family leave has become immensely important to modern families, especially in this era of two working parents. But the leave has paid the greatest benefit to the wealthiest workers, since they are the ones most able to take time off without pay. Although paid leave still would not make it attainable for everybody, it certainly would help those people lower on the income ladder take time for family emergencies, especially a few more precious weeks with newborns or gravely ill parents.

We know, as people, how much those weeks mean. And we all ought to be able to partake of them fully, whatever our status as workers.