

Working Survivors Need Paid Safe Leave

FEBRUARY 2026

A substantial percentage of workers are survivors of violence: 47.3 percent of women and 44.2 percent of men in America reported experiencing sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking from an intimate partner at some point in their lifetimes.¹ This violence leaves many survivors struggling to obtain and maintain employment. In a survey of survivors of intimate partner violence who experienced workplace harassment or abuse, 23 percent reported losing their jobs, and 21 percent said they missed days of work related to the abuse they experienced.²

This potential loss of employment presents a significant issue: the primary reason domestic violence survivors report that they are unable to leave an abusive relationship is a lack of economic security to support themselves.³ In a 2018 survey of people who had experienced domestic violence, the vast majority of whom were women, 73 percent of respondents said they remained in an abusive relationship due to their financial insecurity.⁴ This means domestic violence survivors are often caught in a dilemma – they need to work and earn money to be able to leave an abusive relationship, but the abuse they're subjected to severely impacts their ability to work.⁵

Workers experiencing violence, abuse, or harassment may need various supports at work to maintain employment, including –

- Taking time off from work to seek safety, legal services, or other forms of support;
- Needing safety accommodations at work to stay safe from an abusive person;
- Needing to change jobs or job locations so their stalker or abuser cannot find them;⁶
or
- Needing flexibility because an abusive partner makes it difficult to get to work, for example, by taking their car keys or sabotaging childcare arrangements.⁷

Access to job-protected paid leave can help survivors remain in their jobs and maintain the financial autonomy needed to leave their abusive partners and keep their families

safe. Domestic violence survivors have reported needing an average of 15 to 20 days¹³ of paid leave to handle the impacts of their abuse, while survivors of stalking lost an average of 78 hours of paid work six months after they sought a restraining order.¹⁴

Paid **“safe leave”** is a category of short- or long-term paid leave that workers can use to address the impacts of violence, abuse, and harassment. Safe leave helps ensure that every survivor can heal from the violence they experience and allows their family members and caregivers to provide support without job loss or economic instability.

Certain Communities Are at Higher Risk of Violence and In Greater Need of Safe Leave

American Indian or Alaska Native women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ people, experience disproportionate rates of violence, which can impact their ability to obtain and maintain employment.

A study of American Indian/Alaska Native women found that they are 1.2 times more likely to experience violence compared to non-Hispanic white women.⁸ Of the American Indian Alaska Native women surveyed who experienced violence, 40.5 percent missed days of school or work.⁹ Many survivors with disabilities¹⁰ face disproportionate rates of violence often because their abusers, or other people close to them, weaponize their disabilities against them. LGBTQIA+ survivors¹¹ also experience disproportionately high rates of violence and harassment. In a study of victimization by sexual orientation and gender identity, domestic violence was eight times as high among bisexual persons and more than twice as likely among gay and lesbian compared to straight persons.¹²

Current Policies Do Not Adequately Meet the Needs of Survivors

Just over 25 million workers still do not have a single paid sick day, and nearly three-quarters do not have paid family leave through an employer for longer-term needs.¹⁵ Federal law does not guarantee all workers paid family and medical leave or paid sick leave for any reason. Currently, the only federal paid safe leave protection is Executive Order 13706,¹⁶ which requires federal government contractors to provide paid sick and safe leave to their employees, including to address the impact of domestic violence and sexual assault on themselves or their family members. While this protection is impactful, it applies only to federal contract workers – only a segment of the overall workforce.

Access to paid leave from work to address the impacts of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking largely depends on voluntary employer policies or employees working in a state, city, or county that requires this form of paid, job-protected leave. Most of the 19 states with paid sick leave requirements include safe leave.¹⁷ In 6 of the

14 states that have passed paid family and medical leave laws – Colorado, Connecticut, New Jersey, Oregon, Maine and Minnesota – workers can take leave to address the impacts of forms of violence.¹⁸

Workers in states without any paid sick and safe day laws may be able to take paid time off through their employer, but may not be able to use it for safe leave purposes.¹⁹ Workers in low-wage jobs, workers of color and women – often the same workers who face higher risks of experiencing violence²⁰ – are less likely to have access to paid time away from work.²¹ Workers with limited paid leave may need to use it to care for a loved one, take care of a sick child, or for vacation, leaving them without enough days left to address their victimization. To meet the needs of all survivors and their family members, we need national paid safe leave protections.

Lack of Safe Leave Costs the Economy Billions of Dollars and Hurts Businesses

The lack of safe leave has negative impacts on businesses and the U.S. economy. A 2017 study estimated that the American economy loses approximately \$137.8 billion (in 2017 dollars) in short-term productivity due to gender-based violence and harassment.²² Nearly 7 percent of stalking victims are forced to change or quit their jobs or leave school to keep themselves safe and stop the behavior.²³

Safe leave can mitigate these harmful effects. Data shows that paid leave policies add to businesses' bottom lines. With paid leave, businesses experienced lower turnover costs, higher productivity, and higher morale.²⁴ A 2020 study showed that replacing workers typically costs 24 percent of annual wages, and as much as 150 percent in some industries.²⁵ Paid safe leave would mean more survivors would be able to address the impacts of their abuse and seek safety, and employers would be able to retain employees and maximize productivity.

Lawmakers Can Better Support Working Survivors

Safe leave laws must provide job-protected paid leave from work for it to be accessible for survivors. Without continued income, survivors struggle to maintain financial security, leave an abusive partner,²⁶ and address their mental and physical health.²⁷ To support the most economically vulnerable survivors, paid safe leave laws and policies must cover all workers, no matter what kind of job they hold, how long they have been at that job, or where they work. Moreover, it is critical that employees cannot be fired or

otherwise retaliated against for asking for or taking paid safe leave. Finally, paid leave must be inclusive of the unique needs of survivors by allowing workers to use leave to heal from injuries, seek counseling, relocate or access legal support.

States continue to advance safe leave protections for workers. In October 2024, California passed AB 406, which prohibits discrimination and retaliation against survivors and their families who are survivors for taking qualifying leave related to violence – including seeking legal, medical and mental health, or safety services.²⁸ The following month, voters in Alaska and Missouri overwhelmingly voted in favor of paid sick and safe leave.²⁹ While the Missouri legislature repealed the earned sick and safe leave ballot measure, Alaska’s ballot measure remained and joined 16 states that have a paid sick and safe days law in place.³⁰

Congress can better support survivors across the nation by passing the Healthy Families Act, the FAMILY Act, and the SAFE for Survivors Act.

The **Healthy Families Act** would allow employees to earn up to seven job-protected paid sick days each year. Leave may be used by employees for recovery or to seek assistance related to an incident of domestic violence or sexual assault.³¹

The **FAMILY Act** would allow workers to receive a portion of their pay when they need time away from their jobs for family or medical reasons. Benefits could be used while workers are on safe leave.

The **SAFE for Survivors Act** would allow victims to take time off from work without fear of penalty, require that employers provide reasonable accommodations to assist survivors dealing with the aftermath of violence, provide access to unemployment benefits for survivors, and establish insurance protections to support survivors – ensuring that victims are not punished for their abusers’ crimes.

Survivors need paid safe leave to maintain economic security, leave their abusive partners, and seek safety and healing for their families. We call on federal lawmakers to enact the Healthy Families Act, the FAMILY Act, and the SAFE for Survivors Act, so no survivor is forced to choose between a paycheck and living free of violence and harassment.

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The National Partnership for Women & Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, reproductive health and rights, access to quality, affordable health care and policies that help all people meet the dual demands of work and family. More information is available at NationalPartnership.org.

Futures Without Violence (FUTURES) advances healthier, safer and more prosperous communities. Through innovative programs, award-winning public campaigns, and lasting policy change, FUTURES prevents violence against women and children, expands access to economic opportunity and quality healthcare, creates positive pathways for men and boys, and prepares the next generation of leaders – focused on communities where it’s needed most. With partners across the U.S. and around the world, we are building the future we believe in, together.

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