



## OP-ED: EARNED SICK LEAVE A LIFELINE FOR SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

AMY DUNFORD | DECEMBER 30, 2016

But with efforts stalled to advance sick leave legislation in New Jersey, survivors continue to be put in danger



Amy Dunford

Over 1 million New Jersey workers—that’s one in four--do not have earned sick time, an essential benefit that would strengthen the economic security of Garden State workers, improve productivity, and protect public health.

But while the public conversation about this common sense policy has centered on the need for workers to stay home when they are ill, there is another vital part of proposed legislation: extension of these same rights to survivors of domestic and sexual violence. A survivor of intimate partner violence - more

commonly referred to as domestic violence - or of sexual assault does not have a choice in their victimization, just as someone does not have a choice in coming down with the stomach flu that prevents them from going to work.



As a volunteer crisis counselor I have sat with survivors of domestic violence while filing temporary restraining orders and counseled survivors of sexual assault as they have talked with police and navigated the legal system. I have been with survivors for hours, both in the middle of the night and in the middle of

the workday. Dealing with sexual assault or domestic violence does not take just a few minutes – it takes hours, days, months or even years.

Thankfully, the earned sick leave bills before the Legislature all include a provision for “safe time,” which allows survivors to take paid time off to seek treatment for physical or psychological injury, use victim services and/or counseling, relocate and/or utilize the legal system such as to file a restraining order.

Unfortunately, efforts to move the earned sick leave legislation forward have stalled, harming New Jersey workers who are affected by intimate partner violence and sexual assault. Every day that survivors do not have access to paid sick leave, they will continue to be put in danger, decreasing their chances to leave an abuser, to heal and to recover.

Domestic and sexual violence affects millions of people in the Garden State. More than one in four New Jersey women and men have experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Nearly half of New Jersey women have experienced some form of sexual violence other than rape.

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An average of three rapes and 178 domestic violence offenses are reported to police every day in New Jersey. This is one domestic violence act every eight minutes. And these numbers are most likely higher, since only an estimated 34 percent of rape and sexual assault victims - and 58

percent of intimate partner violence victims - report to the police.

And sexual violence disproportionately affects low-income people: nationally, women earning less than \$25,000 a year are more than three times more likely to experience intimate partner violence than their peers earning more than \$75,000 a year. These are precisely the same low-income and working-poor individuals who are also most likely to lack access to earned sick time in New Jersey, and who would most benefit from a strong statewide standard for employers.

Survivors in New Jersey have some benefits, but they fall short. They can take up to 20 days of protected leave from work under 2013's Security and Financial Empowerment (SAFE) Act, but there's no guarantee that this leave is paid. Survivors can also receive unemployment benefits and compensation from the Victims of Crime Compensation Office, but the process is complicated, cumbersome and insufficient - particularly for low-income working survivors.

Many sexual assault and intimate partner violence survivors need time off from work to recover. Between 25 and 54 percent of survivors miss at least one day of work, according to a number of studies, and when they do, survivors lose an average of 8.4 days of paid work - and can even lose a job entirely.

Missing just a couple days of pay can push a working-class New Jerseyan below the federal poverty line, which is a terribly inadequate measure of true poverty in high-cost New Jersey. If a low-wage worker making \$10 an hour has a family with two children and misses more than three days of work without paid leave, this family would fall below the federal poverty line according to the Center for American Progress.

When survivors take unpaid leave this can further increase their victimization and hinder economic stability. Many survivors stay with their abusers because they depend on them for shelter and money, or the abuser controls their finances.

Becoming a survivor of violence is not a choice. Delaying granting earned sick leave for New Jersey workers is detrimental to all, and for survivors of domestic and sexual violence it could be the difference between a crucial lifeline or nothing at all.

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