

Washington Family & Medical Leave Program: Expand it or Repeal it?

Local News

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OLYMPIA, Wash. - There's a move in Olympia to end the state's Family and Medical Leave Insurance program before it even gets going. It was created in 2007, but got no start-up funding in the recession and now, a group of legislators wants to strike it altogether. It's a type of insurance that allows new parents or people with family emergencies to take a few weeks off work with partial pay of up to \$250 a week.

Marilyn Watkins, policy director for the Economic Opportunity Institute, says it offers a little bit of financial security to families facing challenges.

"It's just a modest social insurance program, where people pay a small payroll premium," she explains, "and then when they need to take those really extended periods of time off, their employers aren't on the hook for having to pay them when they're off for two or three months."

The payroll deduction amounts to \$1 a week for a worker making \$50,000 a year, or \$2 a week if disability coverage is added, Watkins says.

In addition to a bill to repeal Family and Medical Leave Insurance, there's also a bill to expand it and get it moving again. The Senate Commerce and Labor Committee hears testimony on the repeal bill today.

Five other states already have similar family leave insurance programs. Pediatrician Dr. David Springer says he's a fan of anything that takes the pressure off new parents to rush back to work after a baby joins their household.

"The child does a lot better if parents stay home and be parents for the first six weeks of the child's life. That is when you really formulate the child's health, in many ways. The immune system is boosted a lot by having parents at home for those first six weeks."

The federal Family and Medical Leave Act turns 20 this week, but time off under that program is unpaid, and about 40 percent of workers are not eligible for it.

The hearing on SB 5159, the repeal bill, is today at 1:30 p.m. in the Senate Committee on Labor & Commerce, 435 J.A. Cherberg Bldg., Olympia. The expansion bill is SB 5292.-Chris Thomas