

# NEWS



For Immediate Release

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## *Challenge in Curbing the Spread of Swine Flu: Half of Workforce Lacks Paid Sick Days*

As of this release, at least 50 cases of the swine flu have been confirmed in the United States with confirmed cases in six other countries, prompting the World Health Organization (WHO) to raise its pandemic alert level to Phase 4 for the first time since its creation. The U.S. government has declared a public health emergency, allowing the distribution of antiviral drugs from a federal stockpile. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has recommended that those who are sick should stay home from work or school to avoid infecting others.

However, analyses of Bureau of Labor Statistics and other data conducted by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) have found that less than half of workers have paid sick days, and only one in three are able to utilize sick days to care for sick children. Workers without paid sick days lose wages if they stay home, and many workers risk losing their jobs. As a result, workers who lack paid sick time are more likely to go to work with a communicable illness, and parents who cannot stay home with a sick child are more likely to send sick children to school or day care. Workers who work in direct contact with the public, such as restaurant workers, child care workers, and hotel employees, are among the least likely to have paid sick days.

People who go to work or school while sick may infect coworkers, customers, and classmates, resulting in even more infections. With seasonal influenza, this pattern of infection is a serious problem, costing employers and families millions of dollars a year and sometimes causing serious illness or death, especially among infants and the elderly. The deaths among young, healthy individuals in Mexico (identified as a serious cause for concern by the CDC and WHO) suggest that the swine flu has the potential to be much more costly and dangerous than typical seasonal influenza.

The swine flu situation raises the question of the public health costs of failing to provide paid sick days. Despite the public health implications and popular support - four of five Americans think that paid sick days should be a basic labor standard - no national or state laws require that workers have paid sick days.

"Ensuring that all workers have access to a few paid sick days would yield far-reaching benefits to society and--especially during a pandemic--could have enormous preventive health and economic benefits. Many employers say they cannot afford to provide paid sick days, but during a time like this, society can't afford to take risks with the public's health," comments IWPR Vice President and Director of Research Dr. Barbara Gault.

The Healthy Families Act, which would require that paid sick time be provided by employers with fifteen or more employees, is likely to be reintroduced in Congress sometime next month.

For more information on paid sick days, visit [www.iwpr.org](http://www.iwpr.org).

*The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) conducts rigorous research and disseminates its findings to address the needs of women, promote public dialogue, and strengthen families, communities, and societies. The Institute works with policymakers, scholars, and public interest groups to design, execute, and disseminate research that illuminates economic and social policy issues affecting women and their*

*families, and to build a network of individuals and organizations that conduct and use women-oriented policy research. IWPR's work is supported by foundation grants, government grants and contracts, donations from individuals, and contributions from organizations and corporations. IWPR is a 501 (c) (3) tax-exempt organization that also works in affiliation with the women's studies and public policy programs at The George Washington University.*