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Comments by: Representative Garrett Bradley (MA)
Opportunities for Policy Leadership on Developing Work-Family Committees

Legislative committees are an effective vehicle for advancing the legislative agenda. One topic that committees could focus on to meet the needs of their constituents is the support of working families.

What is the need? Many states have standing committees that focus on elder affairs, children and families, and labor and workforce development. Research conducted by the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has found that states that have considered more work-family bills have more work and family committees. However, these committees are structured as independent bodies. States have not created committees that consider both work and family issues. As a consequence, some of the important opportunities for state legislators to respond to the needs of working families might “fall through the cracks.”

Why is this work-family concept important? The majority of families in the United States are working families in which one or both parents participate in the labor force. Balancing the demands of working and caregiving can be challenging. The conflicts encountered by working families can have a negative effect on quality of life and/or job performance.

Employment Characteristics of Families (with children under 18)1

Many of today’s working parents are also members of the “sandwich generation” who face the challenges of caring for children, as well as their own parents and other older adult family members. Most elderly, sick, and disabled Americans depend on working family members for the routine care and support they need.4

One-third (35%) of the US workforce reports that they regularly provide care for an elderly parent or relative. Both men and women share responsibilities.5

While the number of responsibilities managed by American workers continues to rise, the amount of time employees have to fulfill caretaking demands is compromised by lengthening work weeks. As a result, 92% of all American workers feel that they don’t have enough flexibility at work to meet the needs of their children and families.6

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Work and Family committees are critical in the State Legislature. Making sure that our children and elderly are protected is more important than any issue I face as a State Representative. The fiscal crisis our Nation has faced in the last 6 years has made it more and more difficult for working families to survive. I have tried to work with my colleagues to fund programs that affect the elderly and have lobbied for increases in local aid which, in time, will lower property taxes and make our communities more affordable to working families and the elderly.”
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Massachusetts Representative Garrett Bradley on the Importance of Work-Family Committees

Why are working families important to state legislators?

Today's legislators have the opportunity to create new policies which respond to the needs of working families. Currently work-family supports are provided by employers on a voluntary basis and consequently are only available to relatively small percentages of employees. Statewide policies could provide incentives and information that expand the availability of resources needed by working families.

- Legislators can enact policies that help workers balance employment and family care-taking responsibilities.
- Legislators can work with employers to develop workplace policies and programs that promote business effectiveness as well as employee and family well-being.
- Legislators can stimulate economic development by fostering more productive and more supportive business environments for families.

How do work-family conflicts affect constituents?

A national study found that individuals who faced work-family conflicts were two and one-half to three times more likely to suffer from a mood or anxiety disorder, respectively, than individuals who did not face such conflicts. The likelihood of substance dependence disorder doubles for workers experiencing work-family conflicts vs. workers without work-family conflicts.

Parental involvement is crucial for achieving positive social and educational outcomes for children. Having access to work-family supports at the workplace and in the community can make it easier for parents to devote time to their children's academic, physical and social development.

According to one nationally representative survey in 2000, 60% of fathers and 55% of mothers reported they did not have enough time to spend with their oldest child, and had similar concerns with their younger children.

How do work-family conflicts affect businesses?

The conflicts employees experience in trying to balance work and family life can affect their performance at work.

- 30% of those who work on a part-time basis and who say that they do so for reasons other than economic conditions report that they made the choice to work part-time either because they had family/personal obligations or they had problems finding child care.
- 57% of working caregivers report having had to go into work late, leave early, or take time off during the day to provide care for children or dependent elders.
- A study found that employee stress due to concerns about their children after school is associated with decreased productivity and increased absenteeism. Estimates indicate that costs to businesses range from $496 to $1,984 per employee per year.

What can businesses do to support working families?

By providing options for flexible work schedules, afterschool care, telework, and other supportive work-family policies, businesses can improve the quality of life for their employees and boost the morale and commitment of their workforce by reducing the strain on working parents. Businesses can also attract new employees who are currently unavailable due to care-taking responsibilities.

- About one third of caregivers report that they need help balancing work and family responsibilities.
- 63% of workers using flexible work schedules said they were absent less as a result of their flexible work arrangement.
- In 2002, 39% of employees with high levels of flexible work arrangements reported, “high levels of loyalty and willingness to work harder than required to help their employers succeed.”
- In an assessment of the impact of flexible work arrangements in one organization, 81% of users said the availability of this flexibility made them more effective in managing work/family responsibilities.
- In a 2001 study, only 29% of employees with flextime benefits reported work-family conflict vs. 44% of those who did not have such benefits.

What have legislators done to support working families?

Sponsoring bills is one way to measure a state's leadership in support of working families.

From Jan 2005-May 2006, the Sloan Work and Family Research Network identified a total of 234 bills and 530 statutes related to services for working families (afterschool care), time resources for working families (flexible schedules, family leave, part-time employment, phased retirement, remote work), and employment across the life course (older workers).

In the past two years, over 50 bills have been introduced that address issues facing workers as they age. For example:

- Kansas House Bill 2999 provides that grants will go to eligible entities for the purpose of implementing and administering training programs focused on developing an older workforce.

In the same two years, over 60 bills from 25 states have been introduced that involve family leave standards and requirements. For example:

- NY Assembly Bill 3408 requires employers to grant their employees a total of 20 hours during any school year, to attend school conferences or classroom activities related to the employee’s child.
Our survey of 2005-2006 state legislation revealed that:

- 27 states (gold) introduced three or more work-family bills: CT, FL, GA, HI, IL, IA, KS, LA, MA, MI, MN, MS, MO, MT, NH, NJ, NM, NY, NC, OH, OK, PA, SC, VT, VA, WA, WV

- 19 states (black) were designated as having a high number of work and/or family related committees: AR, HI, LA, MI, MN, MS, MO, MT, NH, NJ, NV, NY, OH, OK, PA, SC, UT, WV, WI

- 16 states (dots) had both a high number of bills and a high number of work and/or family committees: HI, LA, MI, MN, MS, MO, MT, NH, NJ, NV, NY, OH, OK, PA, SC, WV

If legislators want to continue the trend of enacting legislation for working families, committees that focus on work-family issues can facilitate this process.

For more bills and statutes, visit wfnetwork.bc.edu/bills.php

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network can provide you with additional research-based information about working families. Visit www.bc.edu/wfnetwork, email wfnetwork@bc.edu, or call 617.552.1708.