

BRIEFED BY THE BELL: FAMILY SECURITY

The Issue

Increasingly, Colorado families struggle to accommodate the demands of work and life. This balancing act most acutely impacts those who are caregiving, including parents looking after young children, adult children caring for aging parents, or family members providing care for a loved one with a serious health need.

For many of these Coloradans, taking time off to meet family care needs comes with the constant fear of losing a paycheck or job. That's why these workers and their families need a stable, affordable, high-quality system to provide [paid leave](#) so they can work without worry. Policymakers should modernize workplace and caregiving standards to keep pace with [today's changing workforce](#) — a workforce largely made up by working parents and older workers continuing their employment beyond the traditional retirement age.

A [recent report](#) from CU Denver and the Bell Policy Center shows most middle-income families have two working adults, and as [Colorado's demographics](#) continue to skew older, more people will work past retirement age. Undoubtedly, these workers and plenty more will need time off to care for themselves or a loved one, underscoring the importance of policies that support a [healthy balance between work and family](#). A system that integrates the two instead of pitting them against one another benefits workers, their loved ones, their employers, and the Colorado economy overall.

The Solutions

Give All Colorado Workers the Ability to Earn & Access Paid Family, Medical, & Sick Leave

Despite overwhelming public support for paid family and medical leave, the federal government hasn't acted. Conservative national-level proposals, such as borrowing against Social Security earnings to take paid leave or small tax credits for employers who offer it, are woefully inadequate. Colorado should act now, as other states have done, to protect its booming economy and support working caregivers with its own policy.

The Facts

- Only 13 percent of private sector workers, nationally, have access to paid family and medical leave through their employers.
- 7 out of 10 small business owners in Colorado support paid leave for employees.
- About 40 percent of Colorado workers, or 870,607 total workers, lack access to even one paid sick day.
- As of 2013 in Colorado, licensed child care centers, family child care homes, and preschools only had the capacity for 106,000 of the 240,000 children who needed care.
- 30 percent of Coloradans live in a child care desert — a neighborhood or community without any child care options, or so few choices that children who need care outnumber licensed slots by 3 to 1.
- In 2017, Colorado ranked third in the nation for highest cost of child care, with infant care accounting for 19.5 percent of median income.

The United States is the only country in the developed world without guaranteed paid family leave.

Like some progressive Congressional proposals, Colorado's FAMLII Act would pool employee funds, allowing all workers to take up to 12 paid weeks off to care for a loved one or themselves. This innovative, Colorado-grown solution was stymied by lawmakers in the state Senate two years in a row. An earned sick leave policy would give Colorado workers job and income protection when they need to recuperate from an illness or care for a sick family member. Unfortunately, a recent legislative effort to allow workers to earn at least 40 hours of paid sick leave per year also died in the state Senate.

Ease Child Care Costs for Colorado Families

The majority of Colorado children live in homes where all primary caregivers work. Child care is necessary to ensure our families and our economy thrive, but the cost is a significant burden. That's why we need smart public investments in early care and education, with a focus on making it affordable, accessible, and high quality. Done right, these investments help kids learn and grow, help parents work and prosper, and help employers retain their workforce.

Policymakers have made strides in offsetting the cost of care by increasing funding for programs like the [Colorado Child Care Assistance Program \(CCCAP\)](#), which helps low-income families afford child care, as well as mitigating the "cliff effect" of CCCAP, whereby a small increase in income leads to a total loss of public child care benefits. Lastly, in 2018, state legislators expanded Colorado's [child care expenses tax credit](#) so families earning up to \$60,000 a year can save on child care costs.

Improve Pay & Benefits for Early Childhood Education Workers

An increase in qualified caregivers would likely lead to more available child care slots in Colorado, but many jobs in early childhood education lack the competitive pay and benefits necessary to retain high-quality workers. Policies to increase the net pay for these workers could include instituting a tax credit for early childhood educators, and/or a wage subsidy program to help recruit, retain, and reward workers in these jobs.

The Takeaways

- Building a strong economy in Colorado means families must have the care they need and deserve so they can thrive in all aspects of life
- While some businesses and industries offer paid family and medical leave, most in Colorado don't
- Workers must know and trust that taking time off won't hurt paychecks or job opportunities
- Many Colorado children live in homes where all primary caregivers work, and the cost of child care is a significant burden for families
- We should invest more of our budget in early child care education to lower costs for families

The Bottom Line

We need to do more. Our middle class analysis shows even high-earning families struggle with the high cost of child care, especially when coupled with an increased cost of living overall. Furthermore, there are too many places in the state where the number of children in need of care vastly outstrip the number of places that offer it. Statewide, licensed providers can only care for about 18 percent of Colorado's 2-year-old children.

No one should have to choose between their family and a paycheck, yet that's what many Colorado families face. Policies like paid leave recognize this impossible choice and set the foundation for healthier families, better workplaces, and a stronger economy.