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More time for baby

Golden State's new governor backs plan to extend paid family leave

Californians who like the idea of getting more paid time off work to care for a new baby may find good news and bad news in the details of Gov. Gavin Newsom's proposed budget.

The bad news: The proposal is not quite as generous as it initially seemed. It doesn't call for each worker to get six months of paid leave, as early news coverage implied. Instead, it calls for each baby to get up to six months of care from a family member, dividing the time between two adults each taking a paid leave of two to four months.

The good news: That's still more than the six weeks of partially paid family leave most workers get under current state law. And as a more modest increase, the plan may be more likely to win approval.

Not that it will be easy. The proposal foreshadows a pitched battle between labor unions and business interests, both powerful forces in the state Capitol. It's an expensive proposition—Newsom hasn't even released an estimate yet—and the plan to pay for it is still in formation. One option is an increased payroll tax, which would

mean taking more deductions from most workers' paychecks. Even though Democrats hold more than a supermajority in the state Legislature, support for a new tax is not certain.

But if successful, a law giving all families six months to bond with a new baby would reinstate California as the nation's vanguard of progressive family policy, a position that has slipped in recent years.

California was the first state in the country to embrace paid family leave when, in 2002, then-Gov. Gray Davis signed the law giving most workers six weeks of partial pay to care for a new baby or sick family member. It now provides low-income workers 70 percent of their wages while on family leave and other workers 60 percent of their pay—funded by a 0.9 percent tax taken out of most paychecks. In addition, women who give birth get an additional six weeks of disability pay.

But in the last few years, a handful of blue states have gone further. Massachusetts and Washington passed laws giving 12 weeks of paid family leave, set to go into effect in 2020 and 2021,

respectively.

Newsom's proposal would boost the amount of time California workers can take, though by exactly how much has not been decided. Families likely would split the time between two parents, or a single parent and another family member.

By prioritizing a six-month period during which babies would get family care—as opposed to a precise amount of leave for a worker—Newsom is reframing paid leave as a health-and-economic benefit for children and families.

"I am committed to this," he said. "Why? For no other reason: It's a developmental necessity Do you want a parent spending time helping build the architecture of a young child's brain? Or do you want government to do it for you?"

Infant care costs a lot—on average, more than \$13,000 per year in California—so the proposal could save some families money.

About this story:
It was produced by Cal Matters, an independent public journalism venture covering California state politics and government. Learn more at calmatters.org.



PEOPLE POWER
The third annual Women's March on Chico drew an estimated 350 to 400 participants on Saturday (Jan. 19) to downtown Chico.
PHOTO BY CHARLES FINLAY