

Parental leave bill would advance rights of families

By TED STEVENS

Paid parental leave should be the next step in Congress' ongoing efforts to advance the rights of families. We've made solid progress on this issue in recent months, and hope to make paid parental leave a reality during the 110th Congress.

In years past, I helped develop the Federal Employee Health Benefits program, mandating health insurance for employees and their dependants; update the Federal Employee Retirement System; establish "Flex Time," allowing federal employees to adjust their work schedules for child care, school commitments, and other family needs; and promote "telecommuting," allowing employees to work from home.

These past actions ensured federal employees spent more time with their families. Yet, despite this progress, Congress must do more to help working parents, particularly with respect to paid leave after childbirth or adoption. To me, as a father of six and grandfather of 11, that time is the most important to new parents who are learning how to care for their newborns, developing family routines, and embracing the many responsibilities of parenthood.

Research shows the first few months of life are critical to a child's development and mothers who are able to stay home with their children during this period tend to be hap-

pier, less stressed, and less exhausted by the demands of motherhood.

Regrettably, neither the federal government nor private sector employers are legally required to provide paid parental leave. Without this protection, many women simply cannot afford to take additional time off



and return to work too soon. New fathers take few, if any, days off. The lack of paid parental leave in America denies too many new parents time the needed to spend with their newborn sons and daughters.

These new parents deserve a guarantee that time off will be available when it is needed most. As a nation, providing this protection is both within our means and in our best interest. The need for paid parental leave is clear; its costs are minimal and the potential benefits are tremendous.

Throughout the 110th Congress, I have worked with several colleagues on legislation which would remedy this situation and provide paid leave for parents. Four other senators and I introduced the Family Leave Act, which would provide eight weeks of paid maternity or adoption leave for federally employed mothers, and one week for federally employed fathers. Under this legislation, nearly 17,000 Alaskans could become eligible for paid

parental leave.

Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn., and I are working to guarantee this protection for parents who work for private sector companies with 50 or more employees. In June, we introduced the Family Leave Insurance Act, which would allow individuals to take up to eight weeks of paid leave after the birth or adoption of a child; to care for a critically ill child, spouse or parent; or for personal recovery from a serious illness. This legislation would assist both businesses and workers by establishing a fund financed through minimal contributions from employers and employees.

According to the Work, Family and Equity Index compiled by researchers from Harvard and McGill Universities, 163 countries already guarantee paid maternal leave. Forty-five countries provide paid paternal leave, while 37 ensure paid leave for the care of an ill child. The Family Leave Act and the Family Leave Insurance Act could begin to bring the United States up to par with these nations.

Paid parental leave is not a new idea, yet it is one of the most practical ways to maintain healthy families. As President Reagan once reminded us, the family is "the foundation of our nation." His words endure today, and taking steps to assure healthy families will increase the well-being of our entire nation.

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