



Healing Injustice at the Workplace

A Faith-Based Study Guide on Paid Sick Days



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The following study guide is laid out in 6 sections. While a timeframe is included for each section (totaling 100 minutes), these times are only a suggestion. Please take as much time on each section as you like!

Introduction

15 minutes

Instructions for facilitator: The study group should read this introduction in advance or to take the first 10 minutes and review it. The facilitator may also summarize it for the group.

Everybody gets sick. But not everyone has time to get better.

Respecting the health and dignity of all human beings is a core religious value for all faith traditions. This includes not just access to health care, but time away from work to recuperate from illness, as well as to tend to ill family members. Yet nearly one half of American workers in the private sector cannot take a sick day without losing a day's pay, or even possibly their job. Nearly 100 million hardworking Americans cannot take time off to care for a sick child or elderly parent.

Our faith compels us to treat others as we would be treated. Many of us are blessed to be able to stay home to care for ourselves or our loved ones when illness strikes. Yet millions of our neighbors, employees, and others with whom we come into contact regularly, such as the cashier at the supermarket, the waiter at a restaurant, or the nurse at a hospital, do not have paid sick days. They must continue to work—through colds, fevers, and stomach flus, on pain of lost wages or even lost jobs. And they cannot take off to care for their sick children or other dependant family members.

The least fortunate among us bear a heavy burden when they get sick. Less than one quarter of low-wage workers have paid sick days, although they are the workers who can least afford to lose a day's pay, and whose jobs often require contact with the public or its food supply. For instance, 78 percent of food and public accommodation workers don't have a single paid sick day. (Please find more facts and figures on page 10.)

Working mothers bear a particularly heavy burden, as they lose pay, promotions, and general financial security when they are penalized for taking time off to care for sick children. In fact, according to the Urban Institute, 41 percent of working parents below 200 percent of the federal poverty line have no paid leave of any kind. Many workers are penalized, disciplined, or fired for taking a day off when their employer does not voluntarily grant them paid sick days. The Healthy Families Act was introduced in Congress in March 2007. The Act would grant seven paid sick days to workers to care for themselves or a family member. It would apply to firms with 15 or more workers.

The injustice and indignity of having to choose between working while ill and losing a day's pay (or your job) is an issue in which many in the faith community have taken a keen interest. Interfaith Worker Justice is working to gather the faith community behind workers and win them the right to paid sick days. Some 20 national faith groups have already endorsed the Healthy Families Act, federal legislation that would grant seven paid sick days to private-sector workers to care for themselves or their families. These include Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish faith bodies, faith-based organizations, and women's faith groups.

Please join us in learning about paid sick days, discussing them with other members of your faith and congregation, and taking part in advocacy to establish a national standard of paid sick days in the U.S.

Endorsers of the Healthy Families Act: National Faith Organizations and Denominations

5 minutes

Instructions for Facilitator: The group should review this list and note the wide array of faith groups that have endorsed the Act. Is your own group or denomination on the list?

American Friends Service Committee
Catholic Charities USA
Catholic Labor Network
Church Women United
Community of Christ
Council on American-Islamic Relations
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Interfaith Worker Justice
The Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Jewish Women International
Justice for Women Working Group of the National Council of Churches
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office
Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Baptist Convention USA, Inc.
National Council of Jewish Women
Network: A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
Presbyterian Church (USA)
United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries
Unitarian Universalist Association
The United Methodist Church – General Board of Church and Society

Religious Framework

20 minutes

Instructions for Facilitator: The study group members should each read a quote below. Others should reflect and comment on the quote and what it means to them. All should keep in mind the following: health, paid sick days, taking care of one's family when someone is ill, and our obligations to work and family. Groups may wish to use some of the questions from the "Reflection and Discussion Guide" on page 7. Note also the "Further Commentary" on the next page that may be of interest to your congregation.

Introduction: The injustice and indignity of having to choose between working while ill and losing a day's pay (or one's job) is an issue in which many in the faith community have taken a keen interest. Respecting the health and dignity of all human beings is a core value for all faith traditions. This includes not just access to health care, but time away from work to recuperate from illness, as well as to tend to ill family members.

Biblical Framework

You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land.... You shall pay them their wages... because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them.

Deuteronomy 24:14-15

Thou shalt not stand idly by the blood of your fellow.

Leviticus 19:16

You shall restore it [life] to him.

Deuteronomy 22:2

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Acts 20:35

I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.

John 10:10, taken as a description of health.

Come unto me all who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.

Matthew 11:28

Further Commentary

The Talmud

“Has it not been taught: If one engages a labourer, and in the middle of the day he [the labourer] learns that he has suffered a bereavement, or is smitten with fever: then if he is a time worker, he must pay him his wages; if a contract worker, he must pay him his contract price.”

--Babylonian Talmud, Baba Mezi'a, Chapter VI, Folio 77a-b

Catholicism

“If we turn our attention to the economic sphere, it is clear that man has a right by the natural law not only to an opportunity to work, but also to go about his work without coercion. To these rights is certainly joined the right to demand working conditions in which physical health is not endangered, morals are safeguarded, and young people's normal development is not impaired.”

--Pope John XXIII, *Pacem en Terris*

“Since economic activity is generally exercised through the combined labors of human beings, any way of organizing and directing that activity which would be detrimental to any worker would be wrong and inhuman. It too often happens, however, even in our day, that in one way or another workers are made slaves of their work. This situation can by no means be justified by so-called economic laws. The entire process of productive work, therefore, must be adapted to the needs of the person and to the requirements of his life, above all his domestic life.”

--Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*

“For its part, society cannot fail to guarantee assistance to families that intend to commit themselves to nursing at home, sometimes for long periods, sick people... The help of all active and responsible members of society is especially required for those institutions of specific assistance that require numerous specialized personnel and particularly expensive equipment. It is above all in these sectors that the synergy between the Church and the institutions can prove uniquely precious for ensuring the necessary help to human life in the time of frailty.”

--Pope Benedict XVI, Address on the theme “Close by the Incurable Sick Person and the Dying,” February 25, 2008

Unitarian Universalism

We affirm the worth and dignity of every individual, and thus affirm access to quality healthcare as a basic human right. It is the responsibility of the public--through government--to meet this and other basic human needs in a just, equitable, and compassionate manner.

--The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

Reflection and Discussion Guide

30 minutes

Instructions for Facilitator: Use these questions as a guide for discussion within the study group. Refer back to the Biblical framework on page 5 when appropriate. The group should think about their own experiences with paid sick days (or lack of them) and think about how workers and families without paid sick days are affected. The group should also discuss a possible solution: currently, there is a voluntary system for employers in which half of all workers and more than three-quarters of low-wage workers do not have paid sick days. The solution proposed is a basic, national labor standard much like the minimum wage.

The Problem

What does your faith teach you about taking care of the sick, especially in your own family?

What does your faith teach you about treating workers with respect and dignity?

What does a “just workplace” mean to you?

Do you and others in your family have paid sick days? Can you use them to take care of sick family members? How have they helped you take care of one another?

What would you do if you did not have paid sick days? What if you only made \$10 per hour?

Do you lack paid sick days? How has this impacted your ability to tend to your family?

There is a very strong connection between income and paid sick days: those earning the least are also least likely to have paid sick days. Is this right? Should only people earning a certain amount of money have paid sick days?

The Solution

Introduction: One proposal is the Healthy Families Act, which would provide a minimum, national standard of 7 paid sick days per year to full-time workers (pro-rated for part-time) to take care of themselves or their family during a short-term illness. It would apply to workplaces with 15 or more employees, a common threshold for labor laws which also would exempt mom-and-pop businesses.

Is the current system (in which employers voluntary choose to offer paid sick days) working?

How do you feel about national legislation for paid sick days? Do you feel the same way about the minimum wage?

How do you feel about state-level laws? What would people do in states that do not have a law on paid sick days (currently all 50 states)?

What alternatives do you see to resolve the problem?



Fact Sheet

15 minutes

Instructions for Facilitator: Members of the group should take turns to read this information aloud and reflect on what the numbers mean and what they say about workers in our society.

Number of workers without a single paid sick day	59 million
Percent of workers without paid sick days	48 percent
Number of workers who do not have paid sick days to use to care for family members	100 million
Percent of low-wage workers with paid sick days	22 percent
Percent of highest-wage workers (top 25% of earners) with paid sick days	69 percent
Percent of low-wage workers who can use paid sick days to take care of their kids	11 percent
Percent of highest-wage workers who can use their paid sick days to take care of their sick children	42 percent
Percent of food and public accommodation workers with paid sick days	22 percent
Number of workers who himself or whose family member has been penalized (including being fired) for taking a sick day	1 in 8
Annual cost of “presenteeism,” the cost to business when workers go to work sick	\$181 billion
Annual net savings to business if the Healthy Families Act passed	\$8 billion

Source: the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, American Productivity Audit.

What YOU Can Do in Your Faith Community

15 minutes

Instructions for facilitator: The group should consider each of these actions steps and decide on three for group members to take.

Make sure your congregation and denomination/faith body have a paid sick day policy that grants at least seven paid sick days a year and allows workers to use the days to care for a sick family member.

Urge your Senator and Congressperson to cosponsor the Healthy Families Act. You can see a list of current cosponsors at <http://thomas.loc.gov> (search “Bills” for HR 1542 or S. 910 and go to Bill Summary and Status, then Cosponsors). If your representatives are not cosponsors of the Health Families Act, urge them to sign on! Send them a brief letter or make a quick call to their office and explain that every worker needs time off to care for themselves or a family member when they are sick. Tell your representative that he or she should cosponsor the Healthy Families Act. Sample letter follows:

Dear Senator/Congressman [name],

I am very concerned about the lack of paid sick days for tens of millions of U.S. workers. It is unjust and undignified that a worker should have to choose between tending their health or the health of their families and losing a day's pay.

I strongly urge you to cosponsor the **Healthy Families Act** (H.R. 1542, S. 910), which would grant most workers seven paid sick days per year.

Thank you very much.

[your name]

Participate in the online rally to support paid sick days for tens of millions of U.S. workers. Go to www.everyonegetssick.org, listen to the information, and share your story.

Ask your faith body, justice group, or other appropriate body to add their name to the organizational sign-on letter. Go to www.iwj.org/actnow/actnow.html to see the letter and e-mail Liz Weiss (lweiss@iwj.org) to have your organization added to it.

Distribute the bulletin insert (on the next page) in your congregation. It is also available at http://www.iwj.org/materials/bulletins/healthy_families.pdf.

Acting Justly for Healthy Families

Respecting the health and dignity of all human beings is a core religious value for all faith traditions. This includes not just access to health care, but time away from work to recuperate from illness, as well as to tend to ill family members. Yet nearly one half of American workers in the private sector cannot take a sick day without losing a day's pay, or even possibly their job. Nearly 100 million hard-working Americans cannot take time off to care for a sick child or elderly parent.

Our faith compels us to treat others as we would be treated. Many of us are blessed to be able to stay home to care for ourselves or our loved ones when illness strikes. Yet millions of our neighbors, employees, and others with whom we come into contact regularly, such as the cashier at the supermarket, the waiter at a restaurant, or the nurse at a hospital, do not have paid sick days. They must continue to work—through colds, fevers, and stomach flus, on pain of lost wages or even lost jobs. And they cannot take off to care for their sick children or other dependant family members.

The least fortunate among us bear a heavy burden when they get sick. Less than one quarter of low-wage workers have paid sick days, although they are the workers who can least afford to lose a day's pay, and whose jobs often require contact with the public or its food supply. For instance, 78 percent of food and public accommodation workers don't have a single paid sick day.

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The Healthy Families Act was introduced in Congress in March 2007. The Act would grant seven paid sick days to workers to care for themselves or a family member. It would apply to firms with 15 or more workers. While no state currently has legislation providing for paid sick days, campaigns to pass such legislation are under way in several states. More than a dozen city and state legislatures are currently considering measures (Connecticut, DC, Florida, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri,

Montana, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Vermont, West Virginia, Milwaukee and San Francisco). These efforts have laid the groundwork for legislative action in 2008. See www.paidicksdays.org for more information and to get involved in a local campaign near you.

What You Can Do

- **Urge your senators and congressman to cosponsor the Healthy Families Act.** If your representatives are not cosponsors of the Health Families Act, urge them to sign on! Send them a letter or call their office and explain how every worker needs time off to care for themselves or a family member when they are sick. Urge them to cosponsor the Healthy Families Act.
- **Sign the petition to support paid sick days for tens of millions of U.S. workers.** See www.paidicksdays.org to sign on.
- **Organize a meeting with your congressional representative to discuss the need for paid sick days legislation.**
- **Ask your congregation, faith body, justice group, or other appropriate body to add their name to the organizational sign-on letter.**

Go to www.iwj.org/actnow/actnow.html to see the letter and e-mail Liz Weiss (lweiss@iwj.org) to have your organization added to it.

***“ . . . I will bring health and healing to it;
I will heal my people and will let them
enjoy abundant peace and security.”***

Jeremiah 33:6

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