

Fresno County supervisor wants donated sick leave cap reconsidered

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By Marc Benjamin

Henry R. Perea

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Supervisor Henry R. Perea came out on the short end of a 4-1 vote that capped how much leave time Fresno County employees can donate to other employees facing extended absences.

But he intends to raise the issue again today by bringing the human faces of those who have catastrophic illnesses, such as cancer, to the Fresno County Board of Supervisors.

Three weeks ago, supervisors approved a plan to limit donations to 80 or 120 hours, depending on the bargaining unit, for employees needing extra sick time.

The previous policy allowed unlimited sick time donations. But some supervisors said that policy was being abused by employees, such as one who has three years of donated time and has increased retirement income by 9% since the extended absence started.

Allowing an employee to continue on paid time off after three years is more of a management problem than an employee issue, Perea said.

He said county managers have tools to address employees who can't come to work.

Union members and family members affected by the change are expected to speak to supervisors in the public comment period today before the board goes into a closed session to discuss negotiations with the county's unions.

Perea said a catastrophic illness program is needed to address those people with the most serious health problems. He wants to see a proposal for catastrophic illness in front of supervisors by early next month.

Supervisor Andreas Borgeas, who voted in the majority three weeks ago, said he also wants a catastrophic illness program.

"I have already met with John (Navarrette, county administrative officer) and I have communicated with other key people to devise a formal policy that will look after those medically needy people while discouraging abuse of the system," Borgeas said.

He said a process must be established for those in the "catastrophic category" and they could be exempt from the donated time limitation cap.

The process must be negotiated with the county's employee bargaining units, which could take some



time.

"If it meets with the board majority, we will do what is necessary to make sure that those who have a timely or immediate concern are given the relief necessary," Borgeas said.

On Saturday, The Fresno Bee chronicled the story of one county employee who has cancer and will now lose 320 of 400 hours of time donated to him because of the new policy. Others said they will have to delay surgical procedures until they have more time available.

County officials said the employees can use Family Medical Leave Act time or state disability insurance to pay them while they are out of work. But the employees also will have to pay for their county insurance to be extended through the COBRA program, which costs more than three times their county insurance plan.

Navarrette said Monday it is not known if, or when, the donated time issue will return to the board for discussion.

"We are, however, looking at various issues, including catastrophic illness, and reviewing how many employees really fall into this category," he said.

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