

EDITORIAL: Fix California's paid family leave for Mother's Day



Families like this mother and daughter would benefit from a proposal to to expand California's paid family leave law to cover small companies.

JIM DAMASKE — AP

Californians can raise a toast this Mother's Day to a modest-but-coveted state heirloom — one of the nation's few long-standing programs guaranteeing paid family leave.

Lavish, it isn't: Payments are partial, a worker has to be on the job for a year to be eligible, and only people at firms with more than 50 employees can take it without risking job loss.

Nonetheless, it's better than workers have in most states and it costs businesses nothing. Some lawmakers here are trying to improve it; we salute them. Mothers like Sabrina Summerfield can attest to the need.

Three years ago, Summerfield and her husband took his three nephews into their home in the East Bay. The small boys were traumatized; their mother, who had a history of unstable behavior, had lost a fourth child in a car crash and had become utterly unable to cope.

Childless and 29 at the time, Summerfield welcomed her new foster children. But she worried: Her husband, a contractor, was busy and she worked full time as an accounting assistant.

Don't worry, the social worker told her. Crises like this are why California passed its paid family leave law. But the insurance company where she worked was small and fell outside the parameters of the program.

Her boss told her that she couldn't be spared. Every employee was needed, in part because another woman in the office was pregnant and likely to leave soon. Overwhelmed, Summerfield threatened to sue, and her almost-as-overwhelmed boss relented. But the well was poisoned, and when her six-week leave ended, her employment at that

small company ended, too.

Anyone with a life knows that rough patches happen, and anyone with a job knows that they don't always conveniently coincide with the end of your shift. Loved ones get sick, couples adopt, babies arrive, aging parents need care and attention. Most developed nations accommodate this universal fact without putting people into the poorhouse. Unfortunately, this nation hasn't yet.

A proposal to create a federal paid family leave program here is, like so many good ideas, stalled in Congress. So Californians have struck out on their own, as Californians do.

The state's program has gotten stellar reviews, though the California Chamber of Commerce insisted when passed in 2002 that it would be a job killer. Now the Legislature is weighing a proposal to expand it to companies like the one where Summerfield worked, with 25 or more employees, and the chamber once again has reflexively put the bill, Senate Bill 406, on its hit list.

More than 40% of the state's workers are at companies too small to fall under the paid family leave law; they risk their jobs if they try to use the program, even though their state disability insurance deductions pay for it.

That should be fixed, and Summerfield, who told her story last month to the Senate Labor and Industrial Relations Committee, has urged lawmakers to fix it. So do we.

She's a real estate agent now, and a mother of four, having adopted the three boys and given birth to a baby in August. Rough patches end, another fact of life to celebrate this weekend.

Wouldn't we be all be better off if more working parents could emerge from them more easily?