

States take lead on paid family leave laws

With the legislative agenda bogged down on Capitol Hill, look for states to step up efforts to enact laws that mandate some form of paid family leave. Some recent initiatives have resulted in signed legislation, while others have fallen short.

The latest push for paid family leave came in Vermont, where Democrats hold a slim majority in the state legislature. Gov. Phil Scott, a Republican, on May 22 vetoed a bill passed by the state legislature that would have provided paid family leave for workers at no cost to employers. It would have been funded by a small tax on employees.

The move came as no surprise, as Scott has made clear he opposes any new tax on Vermont residents.

Previously, the Vermont legislature successfully enacted a modest paid sick leave program for workers, effective in 2017. It was signed into law by then-governor Peter Shumlin, a Democrat.

Employers have resisted legislation that would push the cost of paid family leave onto them. The Vermont bill was specifically designed so employers wouldn't have to pay for paid family leave. Scott's veto shows that simply shifting the cost to workers may not be enough to win over governors who ran for office promising no new taxes.

Currently, California, New Jersey, Rhode Island and New York have state laws that provide some form of paid leave so employees can help care for family members.

Two others have passed laws that will soon go into effect. In the District of Columbia, paid leave goes into effect in July 2020. In Washington, paid leave tax collection begins in January 2019, with benefits available a year later. The D.C. ordinance puts the cost on employers, while in Washington, workers will pay into an unemployment compensation style system.

What's the future of paid family leave? No concrete plans have materialized from a Trump administration pledge to enact some sort of paid leave. In the meantime, look for the battle for paid family leave to be fought in state houses and city halls.