

The Need for the Federal Employees Paid Parental Leave Act (H.R. 626) – Personal Stories from Federal Workers

A Department of Energy employee had to return to work after she used up all of her saved annual and sick leave despite the fact that her C-Section wound had not healed and she was still on narcotic painkillers.

Here's what she wrote:

“After 36 hours of labor, my daughter was born via emergency c-section. I stayed in the hospital for 3 nights after the surgery (if I had stayed one more night, my medical problems likely would have been detected in the hospital, making the remainder of this story very different). The day after I was discharged, I noticed a lot of bleeding from my C-section wound. I went to my doctor's office, where they determined that the wound was infected, and they re-opened the entire wound to clean it out and drain it. The doctors then did not feel that they could safely re-stitch it, so the wound was left to heal from the inside out, with "wet to dry" dressing changes -- the wound was about 17 cm long and 5 cm deep, stuffed with gauze pads. I had a home nurse visit daily for about 2 months, after which point it was decided that my husband could take over care responsibilities for me. Healing was strangely slow, for reasons that no one could ever explain to me. So, there I was, with my leave dwindling away, wondering when this thing would heal, doped up on Percocet. I delayed my return to work several times, in hopes that I could heal and get off the drugs - but the hours ran out, and I simply couldn't go unpaid. As a result, when the leave I had saved up ran out after 3.5 months, I was forced to return to work with a quite long and deep open wound in my abdomen (and still on narcotic painkillers).”

A Walter Reed Army Medical Center nurse had to use a combination of leave without pay and leave donated by her colleagues to take off the necessary time to heal following her c-section. She would like to have more children, but is not sure how she and her husband could manage any future leave.

Here's what she wrote:

“My daughter was born 10 months ago, while I was working for Walter Reed Army Medical Center as a nurse. Because my baby was in a breech position, I had a planned c-section and needed to take 8-9 weeks off to recover from the surgery. Unfortunately, I only had just under 5 weeks of paid leave saved up. Luckily, for me a few of my coworkers had a lot of use or lose leave which they generously donated to me. But even with their generosity, I still needed to take a few days of leave without pay to take off the 9 weeks I had originally hoped to take following the birth. However, due to the difficulty in finding child care in this area because of the extensive day care wait lists, I actually had to take another week of leave which forced me into more leave without pay.

The larger problem is ahead of me. My husband and I would like to have several kids. I'm in my early thirties and I have worked for the government (DOD) for 11 years (4 of which were on active duty for the US Army). I currently have a balance of < 10 hours of sick leave due to my 10 month old needing to stay home from day care due to various illnesses acquired in day care. We would like to have another child within the next year or so. There will be no chance that I will have more than a week or 2 worth of leave for another maternity leave. Will my coworkers come through for me again? I can't depend on it. I don't know what we'll do.

It's so frustrating because I know that DOD is one of the largest employers in the U.S. with the largest budget of the government. However, they cannot find the justification or the appropriate money to offer any paid maternity leave. This is where I really get emotional so I will stop.”

In anticipation of the birth of their first child a couple who work at the Government Accountability Office saved both leave and money to help make expected time off easier for the family. However, unexpected home repairs used up their savings, forcing the new parents to take on credit card debt that they still haven't paid off, and requiring the mother to return to work earlier than planned. They would like to have a second child, but are not sure how they could afford it without paid leave.

Here is what the mother wrote:

“I had 5.5 years of federal employment when I had my daughter, who is now 17 months old After a C-section, which required 8 weeks of sick leave, I was also forced to spend down my remaining annual leave before having to take Leave Without Pay for two pay periods. Because we could not afford to go any longer than that without my paycheck, I came back to work when my daughter was 4.5 months old. I have had to totally rebuild my sick and annual leave, and have made only a small impact there since coming back to work one year ago. Not to mention that we want to have a second child in the near future, and I will not have as much leave for the second child as I did for the first.”

Here is what the father added:

“We had expected my wife to have some leave without pay, and we had budgeted for it. Prior to the baby being born, we had no credit card debt. But a month into my wife's maternity leave, we had to replace the heat pump, which cost us about \$6,000. That completely wiped out our cash reserves. Since my wife was only paid for 45-55 hours per pay period, we were forced to live off credit cards during the remainder of her maternity leave and in the first few months after she went back to work. We have not yet cleared all of that debt. Having the 6 weeks of full pay sure would have come in handy at the time.”

As the sole breadwinner in her family, one Government Accountability Office employee could only afford to take six weeks of maternity leave, some of which was unpaid. She calls her short maternity leave the worst decision of her life.

Here's what she wrote:

Because my husband was in graduate school and I was the sole breadwinner who was new to GAO, I was only able to take six weeks total maternity leave (including my leave, donated leave and unpaid leave) when my daughter was born. It was the worst decision I've ever made, and it really wreaked havoc on my life, my husband and daughter's lives and my mother's life.

One federal employee used up much of her saved sick leave before the birth of her son, as a result of going into pre-term labor that forced her to stay on strict bed rest.

Here's what she wrote:

“When I was pregnant with my son, I carefully saved up my sick and annual leave, calculating how much I would have when he was born. Unexpectedly, I went into pre-term labor a month before he was due. I was in the hospital for 3 days (and then in and out 4 more times before he was actually born) and on strict bed-rest 24/7. This meant that I used up a lot of my sick leave before my son was even born! Although I came back full-time at the time I had originally planned (when he was 3 1/2 months old), I also ended up having to work from home part-time when he was only 2 months old because I felt I needed to do this to try get as many paid hours as I could. That meant that I spent less time with my son (bonding with him, caring for him, getting used to being a new mother) than I would have liked.”

One federal employee was only able to save 4.5 weeks of leave before the birth of her son. As a result, she had to rely on donated leave and leave without pay for her maternity leave. She also used advanced sick leave to stay home, but this has left her with a sick leave deficit that has made being a working mother particularly difficult.

Here is what she wrote:

“I took a total of 18 weeks off for maternity leave. I had only been with the federal government for about 2 years before I went on maternity leave so I didn't have a lot of paid leave accrued -- plus, I only earn 4 hours per pay period.

I used up all my paid sick and annual leave within 4.5 weeks (and I had been hoarding it from the moment I found out I was pregnant). I was eligible to get a leave donation from

my husband (also a government employee), but you can only receive donations up to six weeks post partum so I got about 60 hours (1.5 weeks) from him .

From 6 weeks to 18 weeks, I used a combination of LWOP and advanced sick leave. Advanced leave helped take the financial bite out of LWOP and without the advanced sick leave I would have had to 1) return to work earlier, or 2) use up a lot of savings to stay home.

However, when I returned to work full time, not only did I have no annual leave, but I have a sick leave deficit which will take a long time to dig myself out of. That means if I need to take time off work for doctors appointments or illness I have to use annual leave (still earning only 4 hours per pay period), or I have to work late or on weekends to make up the hours I've missed.”
