

Paid Family Leave: A Social Work Imperative

Presented by:

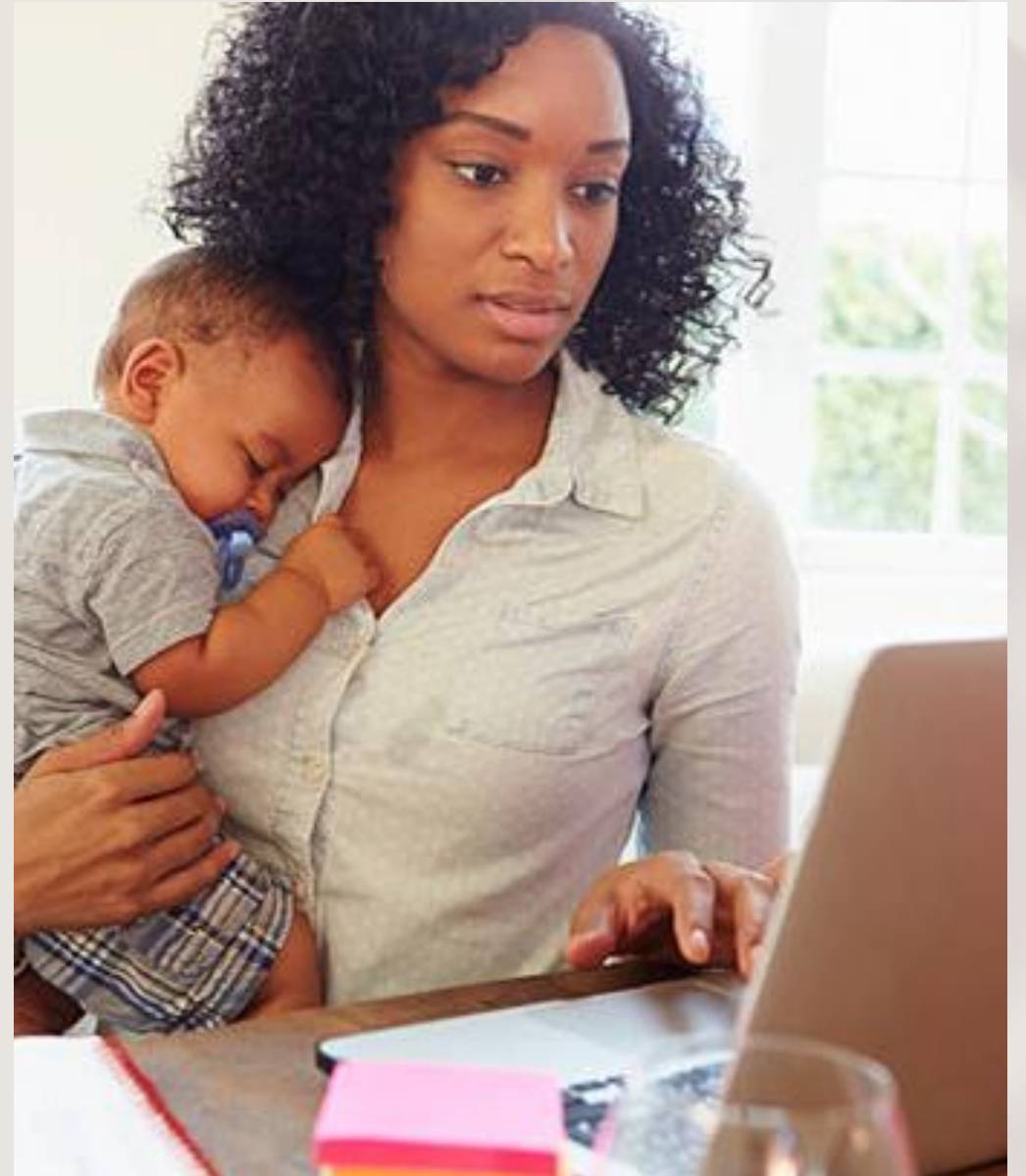
Sacha Klein, PhD,
MSW, Associate
Professor of Social
Work, Michigan State
University

Moderated by:

Gary Parker, PhD,
President, Influencing
Social Policy

March 11, 2026

Insights to Influence: Policy Analysis to
Policy Action webinar series



Agenda

1. What is Paid Family & Medical Leave (PFML)?
2. Why is PFML a Social Work Issue?
3. How You Can Take Action Now



What is Paid Family & Medical Leave (PFML)?

Understanding the Policy



What is PFML?

- A policy that allows workers to take time off from work for family or medical reasons **with partial wage replacement**.
- Common qualifying reasons include:
 - Bonding with a newborn, adopted, or foster child
 - Caring for a seriously ill family member
 - Recovering from a serious personal health condition
- PFML is typically funded through **state payroll taxes** or employer contributions.





Family and Medical Leave Act

PFML vs. FMLA

Only 56% of U.S. employees are eligible for FMLA, and even when eligible, many cannot afford to take it.

FMLA (Family & Medical Leave Act):

- Federal law enacted in 1993
- Provides up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job- & health-insurance-protected leave
- Applies only to certain employers (50+ employees) and eligible workers (worked for employer at least 12 months * 1,250 hours in part year)

PFML (Paid Family & Medical Leave)

- Offers **paid leave** and broader coverage in states with programs
- Often includes **more inclusive definitions of family**
- PFML builds on FMLA by addressing the **financial barrier** to taking leave.

PFML vs. Paid Sick Leave

Paid Sick Leave

- Covers **short-term illnesses** (e.g., flu, doctor visits)
- Typically a few days per year
- Usually earned while on the job



PFML (Paid Family & Medical Leave)

- Covers **longer-term needs** like surgery recovery, cancer treatment, or caregiving
- Can last **weeks to months**

Both policies are essential but serve **different purposes** in worker health and stability.

Why Paid Family & Medical Leave is a Social Work Issue



Social Work Code of Ethics

The values and principles that guide social workers



Service

Our primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems



Social Justice

We challenge social injustice



Integrity

We behave in a trustworthy manner



Importance of Human Relationships

We recognize the central importance of human relationships



Dignity & Worth of the Person

We respect the inherent dignity of worth of the person



Competence

We practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise

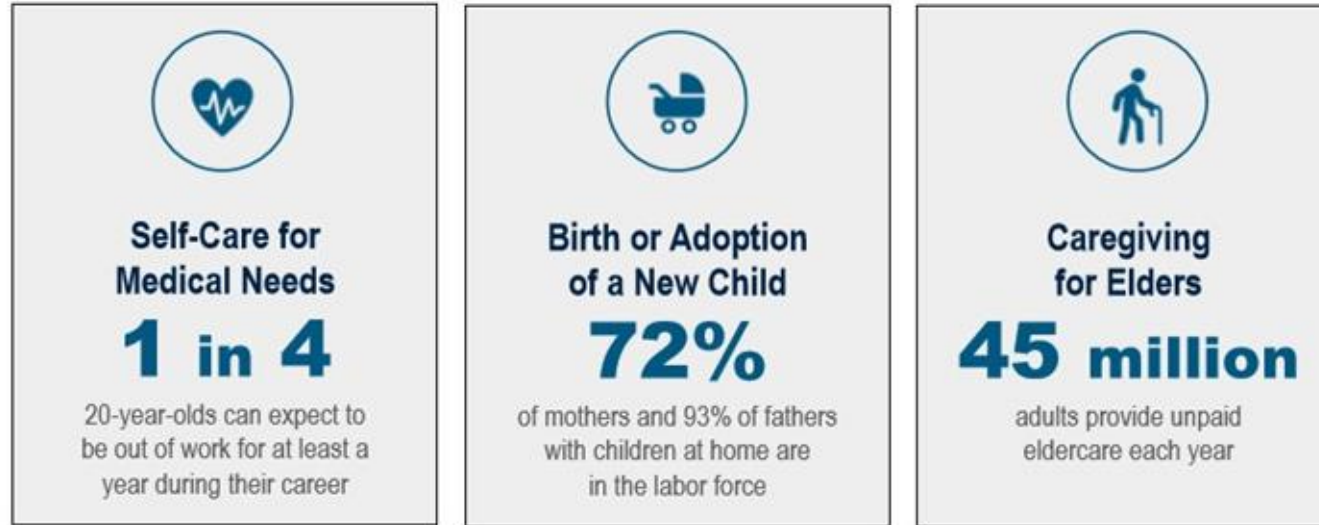
PFML Directly Relates to Our Core Professional Social Work Values

Particularly,

- Service
- Social Justice
- Importance of Human Relationships
- Dignity & Worth of the Person

Service

The Need for Paid Family and Medical Leave



Sources: Council for Disability Awareness; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Definition

Social Work's primary goal is to help people in need & address social problems

Social Problem

Americans are being forced to chose btwn caring for their own & their loved ones' health or keeping their job & paying their bills



Health Benefits of Paid Family Leave

Infant Health outcomes improve

- lower rates of premature & low-birth-weight births
- Lower rates of infant mortality
- Longer duration of breastfeeding
- Higher infant immunization rates
- Increased well-baby visits

Infant Maltreatment rates are reduced

Maternal Health benefits includes:

- reduced postpartum depression and better recovery from birth
- Better overall physical & emotional well-being
- Increased access to postpartum care (especially among BIPOC women)

Improved Child development

Workplace & Societal Benefits of Paid Family Leave

- Promotes **gender equity** by encouraging fathers to take leave.
- Enhances **employee morale and productivity**.
- Strengthens **family bonds** and long-term child development.
- Contributes to a more **resilient and inclusive workforce**.



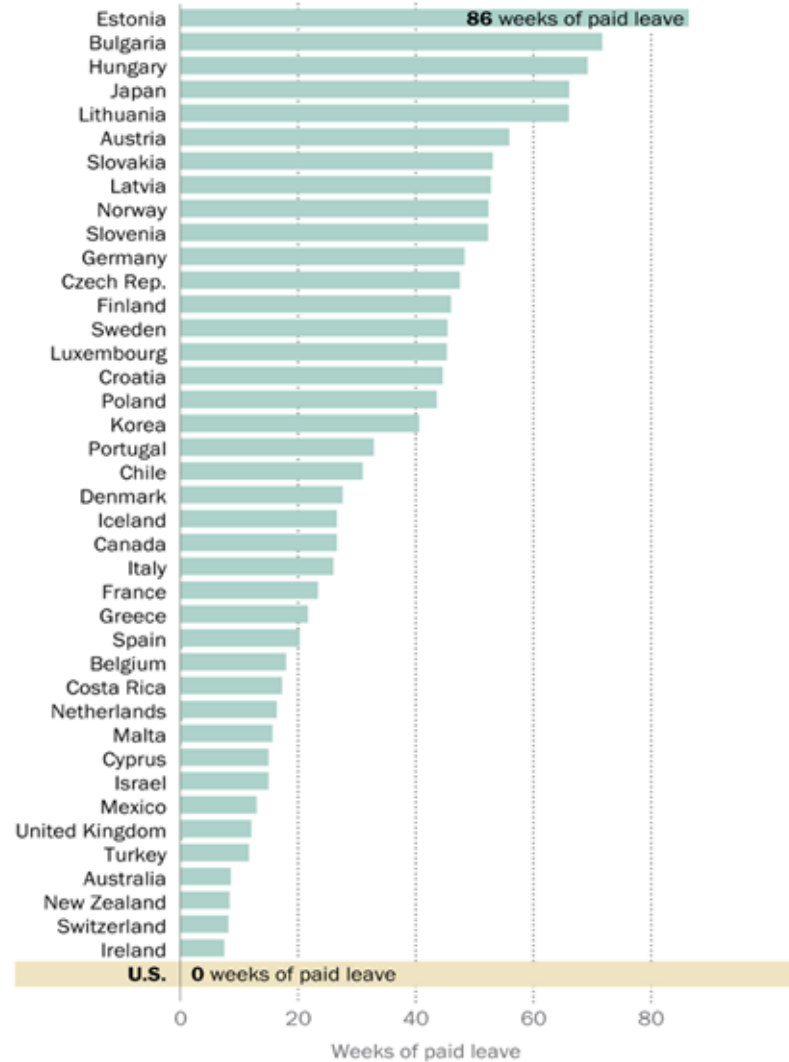
Economic Benefits of Paid Family Leave

- PFML helps families avoid **income shocks** during medical or caregiving crises
- Reduces reliance on **public assistance programs**
- Employers benefit from **higher retention rates**, reducing turnover costs
- PFML supports **economic participation**, especially for women and low-income workers



U.S. ranks last in government-mandated paid leave for new parents

Total weeks of paid leave mandated by national government to new parents



SOURCE: Pew Research Center

Importance of Human Relationships

We Are One of the Only Countries in the World without Paid Family Leave



In most countries, maternity and/or family leave is a legal right guaranteed by the government.



There are only 7 countries in the world besides the USA with no paid maternity/family leave

Importance of Human Relationships



In one of the richest countries in the world, we have **ZERO WEEKS** of paid family leave

Social Justice

Economic Justice

Only 27% of civilian workers in the US have access to paid family leave through their jobs, & only 4 in 10 have short-term disability insurance for their own serious injury or illness

Lower wage workers are far less likely to have access, but even half of highly paid professional workers do not have dedicated paid family leave

Nearly 1 in 4 (63 million) adults in the US are family caregivers; a 45% ↑ since 2015.

Caregiving has become longer term and more intensive

29% are sandwich caregivers caring for both an adult and child under 18 at home.

70% of working-age caregivers are employed while also providing care & half of all working caregivers experience impacts on their employment.

Caregiving takes a toll on the physical and emotional health of caregivers; 1 in 5 rate their health as fair or poor.

“They needed more time than what I had and I couldn’t take any more time off of work...I was working 60 hours a week and coming home and doing everything too... to lose that income, it was a big hit.”

*—Marci, Kansas
Caregiver to her mother and her grandson
Had to leave her job to provide care*

Social Justice

Racial & Gender Justice

- Women account for the majority of family caregivers (61%)
- African American/Black adults are more likely to be providing intensive care.
- African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, younger, and lower-income caregivers more often experience negative financial impacts affecting their savings, debt burden, and ability to pay bills and basic expenses.
- LGBTQ+ caregivers more often experience negative financial impacts related to savings and ability to afford basic expenses.

Disability Rights

- Adults with disabilities are also more likely to be caregivers in Michigan.
- Workers with disabilities may be even less likely than other workers to have access to paid leave, because they are disproportionately employed in part-time and underpaid work, where less than 10% of the workforce has access to paid family leave.

Dignity & Worth of All People



AOC pointing out that dogs get more maternity leave than humans in the US

Parental leave isn't a nice-to-have bonus. It's an essential support system that allows families to navigate the life-altering early days of parenthood. Yet the United States is shockingly behind on this front. As one of the only countries in the world without a national paid leave policy, lack of paid leave leaves millions of parents struggling to balance their most basic needs. Why is it that so many nations prioritize paid parental leave as a reflection of their commitment to families, but here, parents are left piecing together inadequate solutions?

[The Lactation Network, 2025]



How You Can Take Action Now: Advocacy Opportunities



National Advocacy

- Federal proposals like the **Family and Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act** aim to create a national PFML program.
 - *Coverage*: Up to 12 weeks
 - *Benefits*: Replacement of up to 85% of wages based on sliding scale (average: 66%; max \$4,000/month)
 - *Reasons for Leave*: Serious personal health issues, pregnancy/childbirth, bonding with new child, caring for seriously ill family member, military deployment, services for survivors of IPV & sexual assault
 - *Eligibility*: Includes PT, younger & low wage workers; blood & chosen family; regardless of employer size, hours or tenure
 - *Job Protection*: Ensures can return to job, keep health insurance & not face retaliation
 - *Funding*: Shared payroll contribution from employees & employers
- **FAMILY Act Status**
 - S.B. 2823
 - Sponsor: U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY)
 - Referred to the Senate Finance Committee on 9/16/25
 - H.R. 5390
 - Sponsor: U.S. Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT-03)
 - Referred to the House Committee on Ways and Means on 9/16/25
- **Advocacy Organizations**
 - National Partnership for Women & Families
 - Paid Leave for All
 - MomsRising
- **Key Actions**
 - Share personal stories
 - Support legislation and petitions
 - Encourage new candidates to run on this issue

How You Can Help

FIND YOUR NATIONAL REPRESENTATIVE:

<https://www.congress.gov/members/find-your-member>

- **Share your story and help your clients and students share theirs:** Personal experiences influence policy.
- **Join social action campaigns:** Volunteer, donate, and attend events.
- **Educate others:** Host workshops, write op-eds, speak at community forums, talk to your clients & students about this issue.
- **Contact Your Representative:** Encourage them to vocally support this issue via in person meetings, town halls, phone calls, messages
- **Vote:** Support candidates who prioritize paid leave policies.
- **Run:** We need social workers in office and others who run on this issue
- **Other ideas?**

State Advocacy

- Push for state-level legislation
- Educate local officials and employers
- Build coalitions across sectors: women's rights groups, local NASW, business associations, early childhood organizations, labor/unions
- Cultivate champions in the legislature and executive branch & encourage candidates to run on this issue
- Learn from other states about what to include, e.g. higher wage replacement for low income workers, # of weeks, family definitions, safety & bereavement leave, worker protections
- Prepare for resistance from the business community
- Once you have a bill, get an ROI study
- Other Ideas

Local Advocacy

- What type of family and medical leave does your provider offer?
- What type of family and medical leave does your university offer?
 - Faculty
 - Staff
 - Student employees
- What type of family and medical leave does your member organizations and field placement agencies offer?
- Is this a priority for your state NASW organization?
- Educational Opportunities for Social Work Students
 - Broker field placement opportunities/internships at advocacy organizations working on PFML
 - Course assignments
 - Events

Where Will You Start?

What is one thing that you can do personally and one thing you can do professionally this month to help advance Paid Family & Medical Leave?

Thank you!

Paid Family and Medical Leave is a cornerstone of a compassionate, equitable, and economically stable society. Let's work together to make it a reality for all.



Questions?



Contact Us



- **Sacha Klein**, Associate Professor of Social Work, Michigan State University, kleinsa@msu.edu
- **Gary Parker**, President of Influencing Social Policy, garygparker@gmail.com

