March 11, 2020

The Honorable Bobby Scott  
The Honorable Virginia Foxx  
Chairman  
Ranking Member  
Education & Labor Committee  
Education & Labor Committee  
U.S. House of Representatives  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Alma Adams  
The Honorable Bradley Byrne  
Chair  
Ranking Member  
Workforce Protections Subcommittee  
Workforce Protections Subcommittee  
U.S. House of Representatives  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: COVID-19 and Sick-Leave Benefits

Dear Chairpersons Scott and Adams and Ranking Members Foxx and Byrne:

On behalf of the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (ACOEM), I am writing to urge congressional action to extend sick-leave benefits to all American workers during the current coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic.

ACOEM is a national medical society representing 4,500 occupational medicine physicians and other health care professionals devoted to promoting optimal health and safety of workers, workplaces, and environments.

The College is dedicated to improving the care and well-being of workers through science and the sharing of knowledge. From this perspective, ACOEM offers the following insights for your consideration.

To limit the spread of COVID-19, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recommended that employers “actively encourage” workers with symptoms of a cold or other respiratory infection to stay home. Likewise, workers and others exposed to an infected person should expect to be quarantined for weeks. As a result of such containment, many workers will suffer significant economic hardship if their work absences are not covered by sick leave or other benefits.
The evolving COVID-19 epidemic poses risks of harm to many of us. Current efforts to limit person-to-person transmission emphasize viral containment by restricting travel, avoiding crowds, limiting social contacts, and isolating infected persons. The CDC’s recommendation for workers is another example. Some containment efforts will be voluntary, but in other cases, public health officials may enforce a quarantine on individuals with known COVID-19 exposure or infection. In the near future, whole towns, cities or geographical areas may be subjected to quarantine, as has already occurred in other countries.

About 25% of all U.S. workers, and at least a third of U.S. workers in the private sector, do not have sick leave benefits. Nearly half of workers in service industries do not have paid sick leave. That group includes food service and personal care workers, who are typically in the bottom 25% on the pay scale. For many such workers, we anticipate that containment efforts over the next few months will pose significant economic challenges. And we fear that those economic challenges will reduce the effectiveness of public health containment efforts.

Given the potentially large numbers who may be infected in this epidemic and the possibility that our health care systems could be overwhelmed, it also seems likely that large numbers of people will require care at home. That, in turn, would necessitate quarantine of family members and employees who serve as caregivers, potentially for more than 14 days.

Accordingly, ACOEM is encouraging governmental and business leaders to create incentives for U.S. employers to grant sick leave benefits to workers, including those infected and others quarantined, extending up to 4 weeks during the current Covid-19 epidemic. Such incentives will help to control the spread of COVID-19 infections in workplaces and communities by reducing the economic hardships that might otherwise discourage workers from complying with emergency public health efforts.

ACOEM notes that granting such sick leave during the COVID-19 epidemic, and perhaps during other community outbreaks of infectious diseases, is likely to yield significant public health benefits. A recent study of workers in San Francisco found that when workers were able to take sick leave, rates of influenza-type illnesses in their workplace decreased significantly over the subsequent year. We expect that by assisting workers in complying with containment efforts, we will more quickly bring this epidemic to an end.

We again ask that Congress act to extend sick-leave benefits to all American workers during the current COVID-19 epidemic and thank you for your consideration of this
request. Please do not hesitate to contact Patrick O’Connor, ACOEM’s Director of Government Affairs, at 703-351-6222 with any questions.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Stephen A. Frangos, MD, MPH, FACOEM
President

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iv Pichler S and Ziebarth NR (2018). The pros and cons of sick pay schemes: Contagious presenteeism and noncontagious absenteeism behavior. Published on VOX, CEPR Policy Portal