

**LETTER** *Published February 24, 2026 · 8 minute read*

# **Statement for the Record on the House Hearing Examining Innovative Approaches to Paid Leave**

**Curran McSwigan, Zach Moller, & Olivia Newman**

On February 24, 2026, the United States House Committee on Education & Workforce's Subcommittee on Workforce Protections held a hearing entitled "Balancing Careers and Care: Examining Innovative Approaches to Paid Leave." Third Way submitted the following Statement for the Record in response to this hearing.

February 24, 2026

Committee on Education & Workforce  
Subcommittee on Workforce Protections  
United States House of Representatives  
2175 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Statement for the Record on the hearing entitled: "Balancing Careers and Care: Examining Innovative Approaches to Paid Leave."

Dear Chairman Mackenzie and Ranking Member Omar,

It's been over 30 years since the passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), and federal progress on paid leave remains stuck. Just half of all workers have an unpaid leave benefit, and paid leave is a privilege that mostly goes to college-educated workers in office jobs. <sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, policymakers across the country are exploring new ideas to expand paid leave. At the federal level, the House Paid Family Leave Working Group recently introduced the *More Paid Leave for More Americans Act*, a bipartisan legislative package expanding access to paid leave. <sup>2</sup> Several states have also taken matters into their own hands. Two decades ago, California was the first to establish a state-level paid leave program for workers. Now, 12 additional states and Washington, DC, have their own comprehensive paid family and medical leave (PFML) programs. Other states are also expanding paid leave options through numerous initiatives.

Third Way has researched recent federal- and state-level paid leave innovations, and we believe progress is possible in our current political environment. <sup>3</sup> We encourage the Subcommittee to consider how federal policymakers can build on these approaches to get paid leave for more workers. Doing so would improve child and maternal health, support both big and small businesses, and stimulate economic growth. <sup>4</sup> Our statement for the record highlights trends in state PFML policies, important considerations for federal policymakers working on paid leave, and key takeaways from the bipartisan House Paid Family Leave Working Group's recent legislative package.

Third Way applauds the House Education and Workforce Subcommittee on Workforce Protections for continuing this important conversation. We hope that lawmakers will capitalize on recent state and federal momentum to get more paid leave to more people.

## State Paid Leave Program Types

Right now, most state-level PFML programs fall into one of three categories:

- **Social Insurance Programs:** Dedicated payroll deductions from employees and/or employers are usually redirected to a state-managed fund that finances PFML benefits. Most private employers are required to enroll. <sup>5</sup>
- **Voluntary Programs:** Most private employers and non-covered individual workers have the option to purchase PFML plans from private insurance companies. <sup>6</sup> Premiums from participating employers and/or employees fund the benefits. <sup>7</sup>
- **State Employee-Only Programs:** States offer paid leave programs for state employees, such as government workers or teachers. <sup>8</sup>

## Five Takeaways from State Programs

There are clear patterns across state PFML programs. Below, we highlight five key takeaways that lawmakers can use as they craft accessible and effective PFML policies.

### 1. Robust benefits and marketing increase PFML use.

- More employees will take advantage of PFML policies that offer high and/or progressive wage replacement rates and that allow for longer leave periods. <sup>9</sup>
- More workers use PFML when states advertise benefits and help employees understand how to use them. <sup>10</sup>

### 2. States are on different timelines, which creates varying needs.

- States with older social insurance programs see high participation that has increased over time. <sup>11</sup> But low-income employees are still often excluded from these benefits. <sup>12</sup>
- New programs have lower uptake. <sup>13</sup> Social insurance programs face high start-up costs and low visibility, while voluntary ones shift costs to employers and workers. <sup>14</sup>

### 3. Issues persist when it comes to data and small business.

- The patchwork of state regulations makes data collection difficult. Without data, it is hard to track the effectiveness of PFML initiatives, especially in states with voluntary programs. <sup>15</sup>
- Small employers often opt out of PFML programs because they cannot afford to provide the benefits, even if they would like to offer them. <sup>16</sup>

### 4. Investment in the implementation phase is crucial.

- In states with some form of PFML, employees and/or employers usually make regular contributions to a PFML fund, so the program becomes financially self-sustaining after a number of years. <sup>17</sup>
- It is critical for state governments to financially support their PFML systems at first, as new programs can struggle in the implementation phase due to budget constraints. <sup>18</sup>

### 5. Existing federal proposals can help state PFML programs thrive.

- In 2024, the bipartisan House Paid Family Leave Working Group introduced the legislative package ***More Paid Leave for More Americans Act***, which aims to simplify benefit delivery, ease compliance burden for workers and employers, and encourage new PFML program development. It features two pieces of legislation:
  - **The Interstate Paid Leave Action Network Act (I-PLAN Act):** Facilitates collaboration between states to build a national framework for state PFML programs. <sup>19</sup>
  - **The Paid Family Leave Public Partnerships Act:** Provides grants to states that use public-private partnerships to establish PFML programs. <sup>20</sup>

## Key Considerations for Federal Policymakers

Based on the takeaways above, we recommend nine actions policymakers should take to provide more paid leave for more people *today*. The first of these suggestions will help states make progress now, and the rest will lay the groundwork for future federal policies.

## To Help States Make Progress

1. Establish the Interstate Paid Leave Action Network (I-PLAN).
2. Support the expansion of state social insurance programs and improvements to voluntary programs.
3. Give small businesses the ability to join group paid family leave insurance plans.
4. Boost efforts to increase program awareness among all types of leave programs.
5. Invest in understanding barriers to program utilization by workers and employers.

## To Plan for a Federal Program

1. Use progressive wage replacement rates.
2. Ensure any progress includes protections for low-wage workers.
3. Offer a sliding scale of contribution rates for employers based on company size.
4. Ensure any program includes a robust amount of leave.

# Time for Progress: The More Paid Leave for More Americans Act

*The following is a reproduced blog written by Third Way on December 4, 2025 that explains the More Paid Leave for More Americans Act.*

A pragmatic approach to paid leave has been the foundation behind the Bipartisan House Paid Family Leave Working Group, led by Co-Chairs Representative Chrissy Houlahan (D-PA) and Representative Stephanie Bice (R-OK). Alongside their working group members, Reps. Bice and Houlahan have been working hard to get more paid leave to more Americans—most recently with the introduction of the More Paid Leave for More Americans Act.<sup>21</sup> The package includes two pieces of legislation—the Interstate Paid Leave Action Network Act (I-PLAN Act) and the Paid Family Leave Public Partnerships Act.<sup>22</sup> In this explainer, we briefly describe these two components and the benefits they can provide for working families.

## What is the I-PLAN Act?

As states advance their own paid leave programs, each comes with its own set of rules and regulations. This often makes it hard for organizations with employees working across different states to track eligibility and deliver benefits.<sup>23</sup>

The I-PLAN Act creates the Interstate Paid Leave Action Network: a multi-state initiative where participating states work together to create a national framework for state paid family and medical leave (PFML) programs.<sup>24</sup> Members join voluntarily, meet to share data, present best practices, and develop an “I-PLAN Agreement.”<sup>25</sup> The agreement would establish common definitions and administrative standards for PFML programs to help shape future collaboration.<sup>26</sup>

By facilitating a process for states to align their standards and practices, the I-PLAN Act simplifies benefit delivery and compliance for both employers and workers.<sup>27</sup> This can help multistate businesses provide paid leave to their employees as well as help states learn from one another to improve existing programs going forward.

## **What is the Paid Family Leave Public Partnerships Act?**

Establishing a PFML program requires robust funding, both for starting up the program and sustaining it.<sup>28</sup> In fact, high costs are often cited by states as a barrier to implementing their own paid leave programs, leaving many workers without access to this critical benefit.<sup>29</sup>

The Paid Family Leave Public Partnerships Act provides competitive grants to incentivize states to establish PFML programs that utilize public-private partnerships.<sup>30</sup> For example, a state government could collaborate with a private-sector insurance company to provide and administer PFML benefits—like we see in different types of programs in New Hampshire, Vermont, and Colorado.<sup>31</sup> States that follow this public-private partnership model are eligible for funding as long as they also offer at least six weeks of paid leave for birth or adoption, provide a 50–67% wage replacement rate, and cap benefits at 150% of the state’s average weekly wage.<sup>32</sup> Preference will be given to states with low existing PFML uptake, program plans that support low-income individuals, and those that seek to finance their programs long-term beyond federal funding.<sup>33</sup> This creates a multi-faceted initiative that both encourages new program development across states without policies and provides avenues to funding for states seeking to expand their existing operations.<sup>34</sup>

## **Bottom Line**

The I-PLAN Act and the Paid Family Leave Public Partnerships Act are true commonsense pieces of bipartisan legislation: they do not impose mandates on states or employers, they are relatively low-cost, and their implementation would not require a substantial increase in federal oversight or operations.<sup>35</sup> American employers, who express strong agreement with these acts’ goals, should also favor the legislation.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, these bills won't solve all issues related to paid leave, but they are the first signs of much-needed progress. Thousands of parents, caretakers, and those that need time to care for themselves could benefit from progress on PFML.

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