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Jersey City Joins Paid Sick-Time Movement.

Across the country, only a handful of state or local governments require businesses to offer paid-sick days. Now two cities in New Jersey have joined the pack. Jersey City became the first city in the state to pass a sick-days ordinance last September. Newark's interim mayor, Luis Quintana, signed a similar measure Jan. 28.

Paid-sick time is but one response among elected officials to the current national debate over income inequality and poverty. Jersey City Mayor Steve Fulop was also a prominent voice in support of New Jersey's minimum wage ballot measure last year. While requiring paid-sick days and raising the minimum wage have been popular responses among Democrats, some states have seen bipartisan support for creating or expanding state-level tax credits for working poor.

So far, Connecticut, the District of Columbia, Seattle, Portland, Ore., and San Francisco have paid-sick-leave laws. Jersey City's ordinance went into effect Jan. 24 and both New York City and Newark have ordinances set to take effect later in the year. Each law is different in terms of which businesses must comply with the law, how long before an employee qualifies and how many days of paid-sick time a worker can accrue. To date, cities have been more active in passing paid-sick laws, though lawmakers in Vermont, Washington state, Hawaii and South Carolina are considering legislation this session.

In Jersey City, any business with 10 or more employees must offer paid-sick time to any employee who has worked for at least 90 days. Workers can earn up to five paid-sick days per year. The law also requires that businesses with fewer than 10 employees offer up to five days of unpaid-sick days per year.

Governing spoke with Fulop Jan. 31 about the ordinance. The following transcript has been edited for style and clarity.

I was curious if you did any kind of survey of businesses. Was there any effort to see what the impacts would be ahead of time?

The agreement with the business community and the labor community was Jersey City would pay for a study via Rutgers University a year after initiation to understand the impact and to see what needs to be changed. We're committing money towards that.

We want to make sure that we have a model that works for everybody and our goal is to lead the state of New Jersey in job creation. We don't want to hinder that, but at the same time, we want to make sure we have policies in place that are meaningful to working families. So we're trying to have that balance.

I know that the District of Columbia initially passed a partial paid-sick-leave ordinance, but it left out people in the fast food industry. Your version would apply to those workers, right?

Yes, absolutely, it would. If you employ 10 or more in Jersey City, you are required to provide paid

sick leave. It's earned. It's not a giveaway. It's not additional vacation days. There's an education component. There's a recourse component. It's based on time spent working for the employer.

Were there any adjustments you made to the law based on business concerns?

We tweaked the number of days. We tweaked the number of employees. We think what we've implemented is very fair and balanced for where we're situated in the region.

What about seasonal workers? Did you have a provision for, say, a company that hires teenagers every summer for all four years of high school?

No. We're not separating out different types of employees. We didn't make exemptions. The rules are the rules.

Prior to this law being passed, what was the city's own policy regarding sick time?

Our workers are union workers, so they are entitled to sick time. It's all contract negotiated for us.

What about this moment seemed like it was the right time to test this out?

You know, as the expression goes, 'It's always the right time to do the right thing.' When the economy is perfect or great, people are going to say, don't do anything to disrupt it. When the economy is recovering, people are going to say, don't do anything to disrupt it. Your special interests are always going to take a position saying that now is not the right time. So, I view it as now is as good a time as ever. It's going to be a net benefit to families.

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