

'It's like Typhoid Mary': Restaurant workers spread diseases because they have no paid sick days

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(Getty Images)

By **Julie Swanson**

Louise, who's worked in the hospitality industry for 10 years, says she's seen "servers come to the restaurant while sick, serve tables, throw up in the bathroom, wash their hands and continue serving." Louise, who has been working for 10 years in the hospitality industry in Virginia, lives in the Richmond area but declined to be identified by her real name to avoid jeopardizing her job. .

Louise said kitchen and wait staff are forced to choose between working while sick or losing a day's pay and falling behind on bills. These workers didn't want to go to work sick. Some risk losing their job if they take a sick day. National studies reveal **80 percent** of those without paid sick days are low-wage workers, such as servers and cooks. Louise has suffered from this reality for her entire career, "I have never had a position in the hospitality industry where I've had paid sick days, including management positions."

In Virginia, the situation is dire. More than **1.2 million workers** in the commonwealth have no paid sick days. With the threat of the flu season and the spread of the coronavirus, Virginia is facing a public health emergency. Restaurant, childcare and home health workers are in direct contact with the public. When they go to work sick, they spread germs to some of our most vulnerable residents.

“A sick restaurant worker is like Typhoid Mary. When one worker comes to work sick, the next day several of us are sick,” said Louise.

National statistics back up Louise’s experience: more than 80 percent of food service workers have no paid sick days and 20 percent of them have gone to work while vomiting or with diarrhea. The Center for Disease Control reports that [50 percent of norovirus outbreaks](#) can be traced back to food service workers and the spread of the H1N1 virus could have been slowed if more workers had access to paid sick days.

Louise wants Virginia legislators to take action and pass laws to require employers to offer paid sick days for all workers. “Restaurant workers should not be going to work sick,” she warned. “You are serving people food, talking to people and always on your feet, so you are getting sicker and making other people sick.”

The Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy supports two bills, [SB481](#) sponsored by Sen. Barbara Favola, D-Arlington, with Sen. Bill Stanley, R-Franklin, as chief co-patron and [HB898](#), sponsored by Del. Elizabeth Guzman, D Prince William, with Del. Joshua Cole, D-Fredericksburg, and Del. Mark Sickles, D-Fairfax, as chief co-patrons. These bills require Virginia businesses with 15 or more employees to provide their workers with up to 40 hours (five days) of paid sick time per year.

Businesses with fewer than 15 employees are required to provide up to 16 hours of *unpaid* sick time. Workers earn the hours at a rate of one hour for every 30 hours worked. The bills also ensure that workers can’t be fired or punished for taking a sick day or a few hours off to see the doctor during the workday instead of going to an emergency room after hours.

By exempting businesses with fewer than 15 employees from paying for sick time, only four-fifths of Virginia businesses have to offer unpaid time – which decreases the burden on small businesses.

The proposal has drawn widespread support from faith leaders and advocates across Virginia. More than 1,200 faith leaders signed a statement of support, thousands of faith-based activists have made calls and visited with legislators and the United Methodist Women made the issue a statewide advocacy priority. It’s time for Virginia to join the 145 industrialized countries and the 13 states and more than 20 municipalities in the U.S. that have paid sick day standards.

We all get sick. We all need paid sick days. Although we hope all workers will eventually have paid sick days, the proposed bills are a good first step that would help at least 600,000 Virginia workers get paid sick days and approximately another 600,000 get unpaid sick time. All these workers could take a sick day or a few hours to see the doctor without the fear of losing their jobs.

Creating a paid sick day law will help restaurant workers, owners, and patrons. It will help teachers who must care for sick children sent to school and patients cared for by homecare workers. Creating a sick day standard in Virginia is good for business, workers and its good public policy. The bills are moving through the General Assembly and will likely go to the floor this week.

As the former president and CEO of Lutheran Family Services of Virginia I know the importance of providing paid time off or sick days to staff. At LFSVA staff provided important services to individuals with disabilities and students. If we had not offered paid time off, they would have had no choice but to show up sick or lose pay. Their paycheck was just too important to cover living and family costs and yet the very people they were serving would have been at risk. Showing up sick at work isn't right or good for anyone.

Let's protect workers like Louise and all Virginians by passing a paid sick day law.

Julie Swanson is board chair of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy and former president and CEO of Lutheran Family Services of Virginia.

Guest Column

Views of guest columnists are their own. To submit an op-ed for consideration, contact Editor Robert Zullo at rzullo@virginiamercury.com.