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Virginia employers won't have to offer paid sick leave as Senate declines final vote on measure

BY JUSTIN MATTINGLY Richmond Times-Dispatch
Mar 8, 2020



Sen. Barbara Favola, D-Arlington

ALEXA WELCH EDLUND

Virginia employers will not be required to offer paid sick leave.

The Senate did not vote on the agreement negotiators reached on Senate Bill 481 from Sen. Barbara Favola, D-Arlington, before the General Assembly session ended Sunday. Lawmakers will convene again on Thursday to approve the budget and elect judges.

The bill would have required public and private employers with 15 or more employees to provide employees with an hour of paid sick time for every 30 hours they work.

“We are deeply disappointed by the legislators who have put Virginians at risk by refusing to pass a modest bill that would protect workers, families and public health,” said Kim Bobo, the executive director of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, the main advocacy group lobbying for the bill. “Without a paid sick day law, 1.2 million Virginians have no paid time off and many are forced to go to work sick and send their children to school sick.”

Thirteen states have paid sick day policies.

The issue has garnered more prominence over the past week as coronavirus expands its reach. Virginia has two confirmed cases of the virus, which has spread to more than 100,000 people across more than 100 countries.

“Stopping the spread of the flu and the coronavirus is best done by allowing sick people to recover at home,” said Amanda Silcox, coordinator for the center’s Paid Sick Days campaign. “We are concerned that with no paid sick days, workers will show up to work sick and disease will spread across the commonwealth. It’s the job of our legislators to protect public health and they have failed.”

Favola specifically brought up coronavirus when pitching the bill to the Senate, adding that it was time for lawmakers to mandate sick days to ensure restaurant workers and other employees who historically don't receive the time off are able to take a day off.

“We have an interest in protecting Virginians,” Favola said.

Favola's bill would have taken effect Jan. 1, 2021. It did not exempt part-time employees, but did cap the number of sick days an employee could earn at five. (A benefits package offered by an employer with six sick days, for example, would not have been affected).

The legislation cleared the Senate in February, but met mounting opposition from lobbyists about the lack of a part-time exemption, among other issues.

Sen. Steve Newman, R-Lynchburg, said there are 8,600 state employees who work part time and don't receive paid sick days, and probed Favola to see if there was money in the upcoming state budget to fund a change (there isn't).

Sen. Janet Howell, D-Fairfax, chairwoman of the Finance and Appropriations Committee, said the panel has “serious concerns about the fiscal impact.”

Howell asked that the bill be passed by temporarily. The Senate did not give the measure further consideration.

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