

**Statement of David R. Riemer,
Director of Policy and Planning, Community Advocates of Milwaukee
to the Judiciary and Legislation Committee
of the Milwaukee Common Council
regarding the proposed ordinance on paid sick leave
July 21, 2008**

I regret that my schedule today prevents me from testifying before the committee in person

I did, however, want to share with you my views on Agenda Item Number 080420, the proposed substitute ordinance requiring employers within the city to provide paid sick leave to their employees.

One of the greatest challenges we face in Milwaukee is getting more adults into jobs, raising their wages, and making sure they have “work supports” like child care and health insurance to help them stay employed. Without steady work at decent wages, it is impossible to get out of poverty, afford decent housing, and pay one’s energy bills. I have spent much of my career trying to help the poor get out of poverty through work and seeking to expand their health insurance coverage. And for years before I joined Community Advocates, the organization has focused on helping low-income individuals to obtain health care, find safe and affordable places to live, and keep their utilities on and their utility bills paid.

Yet while work is the key to getting out of poverty, work must be balanced with the duty we all have to care for ourselves, our children, our spouses, and our parents. When we need to see a doctor to diagnose an illness or cure a disease, the demands of work should not erect a barrier too great to overcome. When we need to take time off—as *all* workers must do from time to time—to nurse a sick child, or care for a spouse or parent, work should not impose an absolute veto. In a civilized society, the obligation of adults to work hard to earn their livings must be balanced with workers’ ability to take time off on occasion, during normal working hours and without financial penalty, to care for their health and for the health of the family members they love.

There is no one perfect way to strike the balance, but the ordinance you are considering is a good one. It doesn’t just “give away” paid sick days.

Rather, employees must earn it by demonstrating their commitment to stay with an employer and by having paid sick days accrue gradually in proportion to hours worked for the employer. The ordinance carefully limits when paid sick days may actually be used. It also recognizes that small employers need special consideration.

Ideally, this is the kind of law that the State Legislature or the U.S. Congress should adopt, so that Milwaukee's employers don't face a different rule than employers in surrounding cities or states. But we should not automatically block innovative and essential policy change that applies only to Milwaukee (compared to other cities) or only to Wisconsin (compared to other states) in the impossible pursuit of perfect uniformity across jurisdictional boundaries.

Each local ordinance that sets Milwaukee apart from its neighbors (whether temporarily or permanently) must be judged on its own merits. On balance, I believe, *this* ordinance is the right policy—not only because it will strike a better balance for workers between their duty to care and their obligation to work, but because in the end it will not harm Milwaukee employers. The advantages to Milwaukee's employers that flow from requiring paid sick leave—including a more productive workforce no longer torn between the duty to care vs. the obligation to work, the strengthening of employee loyalty precisely because all our employers provide paid sick leave, and the added attraction of jobseekers to Milwaukee employers because of this new benefit—offset any disadvantages due to cost and jurisdictional inconsistency.

Thank you for considering these comments. Again, I regret that I am unable to deliver them in person. Please feel free to contact me at Community Advocates if you have any questions. I can be reached at 414-449-4767 x129 or DRiemerMil@yahoo.com.

Thank you.