

Inclusive Paid Leave: Chosen Family

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What is chosen family?

- Americans have diverse family and caregiving structures that often fail to fit the “nuclear family” image.
- Many people’s families include “chosen family” members—individuals who form close bonds akin to those traditionally thought of as occurring in relationships with blood or legal ties. Such relationships might include:
 - Members of the same military unit.
 - An older neighbor who becomes like an aunt or uncle.
 - A best friend who is essentially a sister.

Yee Won's story

“I was born and raised in Malaysia, but came to the U.S. so that I could safely express my sexual orientation, gender identity, and political beliefs. Separated from my ‘blood family’ by 8,000 miles, I have created a strong chosen family. My chosen family celebrated with me when I became a U.S. citizen three years ago, took care of me when I was recovering from my gender transition surgery, and are named in my living will and my health care directives. In creating my home in the U.S. I left behind Malaysia’s guaranteed paid sick days for all wage earners. As I am currently in the process of surviving and healing from cancer, the need for me and my chosen family to have access to paid work leave is a stark reality.”

-Bowman et al, Making Paid Leave Work for Every Family, 2016

Who relies on chosen family?

- CAP has conducted the first nationally representative survey regarding chosen family.
- The need for inclusive paid leave that acknowledges these relationships is widely shared across many groups including:
 - Active military or veterans, people at a range of income levels, people across many age groups, people of many education levels, and people of many different racial and ethnic groups.
- People with disabilities and LGBTQ people are especially likely to have taken time off from work to support the health-related needs of a chosen family member.

Why is recognizing chosen family important?

- How we define family matters in public policy shapes who can use programs or receive benefits.
 - Welfare programs aimed at supporting mothers and children have often excluded unmarried mothers.
 - DOMA kept same-sex couples from having the same rights and benefits of opposite-sex couples.
- Paid leave is no different. Restrictive family definitions might exclude domestic partners, for example.

- Bowman et al, Making Paid Leave Work for Every Family, 2016

Chosen family in legislation

- There are many examples of ways in which policies already define chosen family:
 - Federal regulations re: funeral leave during Vietnam: “immediate relative” includes “any individual related by blood or affinity whose close association with the employee is the equivalent of a family relationship.”
 - NY’s paid family leave law: “domestic partner” relationships can be established by owning property or living together, having children in common, intending to marry or sharing budgets, length of relationship, or other factors.
 - Chicago & Cook County: Family includes “any other individual related by blood or whose close association with the employee is the equivalent of a family relationship.”
- States and cities have had success recently in enacting paid leave policies using a variety of chosen family definitions.

- Bowman et al, Making Paid Leave Work for Every Family, 2016

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