

# SENATE BILL REPORT

## SB 5097

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As of January 18, 2021

**Title:** An act relating to expanding coverage of the paid family and medical leave program.

**Brief Description:** Expanding coverage of the paid family and medical leave program.

**Sponsors:** Senators Robinson, Conway, Darneille, Das, Hasegawa, Hunt, Keiser, Lias, Lovelett, Nguyen, Saldaña, Stanford, Van De Wege and Wilson, C..

**Brief History:**

**Committee Activity:** Labor, Commerce & Tribal Affairs: 1/18/21.

**Brief Summary of Bill**

- Changes the definition of family member.
- Modifies the requirements for certain employment protections upon return from leave.
- Modifies which employees are eligible for continuation of health benefits during leave.

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### SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR, COMMERCE & TRIBAL AFFAIRS

**Staff:** Matt Shepard-Koningsor (786-7627)

**Background:** In 2017, the Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML) program was enacted to provide partial wage replacement to employees on leave for specified family and medical reasons. Employees are eligible for PFML benefits after working 820 hours in a qualifying period. Premium collection began on January 1, 2019, and benefits were payable as of January 1, 2020. The Employment Security Department administers the program.

The PFML program includes provisions regarding premiums; coverage; the use, duration, and amount of benefits; and an employer option of a voluntary plan, among other

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provisions.

Paid family leave benefits are provided:

- when an employee is bonding after the birth or placement of a child, under the age of 18;
- because of a family member's serious health condition; or
- for a military exigency.

Paid medical leave benefits are provided for an employee's own serious health condition. Serious health condition is defined by statute and has the same meaning as in the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and its regulations.

Definitions. Family member means the employee's child, grandchild, grandparent, parent, sibling, or spouse. Child means a biological, adopted, or foster child, a stepchild, a child's spouse, or a child to whom the employee stands in loco parentis, is a legal guardian, or is a de facto parent, regardless of age or dependency status. A military exigency relates to leave for short-notice deployments, military events, certain childcare and school activities for a military member's deployment activities, and other specified activities.

Job Protection. An employee returning from leave is entitled to be restored to the same or equivalent job. These job protections apply to an employee of an employer with 50 or more employees, who has worked for the current employer for at least 12 months and for at least 1250 hours during the preceding 12 months, with an exception for certain highest paid employees of the employer.

Continuation of Health Benefits. If required by the FMLA, an employer, including employers with a voluntary plan, must maintain health benefits of the employee during the employee's leave. If the cost of the benefits are shared, each remains responsible for their share.

**Summary of Bill:** Definitions. Any individual related by blood or affinity whose close association with a covered individual is the equivalent of a family member is added to the definition of family member.

Job Protection. The current requirements for an employee to be restored to an equivalent position, with equivalent pay, benefits, and other terms and conditions of employment are modified to a requirement that the employee has been employed for 90 days or more.

Continuation of Health Benefits. An employer must maintain existing health benefits during the employee's leave if the employee has been employed by the current employer for 90 days or more.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Available.

**Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members:** No.

**Effective Date:** Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

**Staff Summary of Public Testimony:** PRO: All workers are paying into the fund and should be able to use it when needed. Paid family and medical leave has been a lifeline for many Washington families in 2020 and the law previously did not go far enough to protect people's jobs, include part-time workers, or cover specific families. The expanded definition of family member is important to promote equity by immutable characteristics. The bill would benefit important caretakers. Families of workers need these protections now more than ever. Paid leave should be a right not a privilege. The bill provides job security and health benefits to people needing it most, including women and women of color. Workers in large and small companies need the expansion in job protection provided by this bill. Other states have surpassed Washington regarding more equitable protections.

CON: The PFML program has not been fully-implemented and there is concern with changing it before seeing how the program operates. The small business assistance grant program has not been implemented yet and such businesses cannot afford these costs. The bill could increase taxes for people in Washington. This will have a disproportionate impact on small businesses, requiring them to have the same standards as large corporations. This will be a deterrent for small businesses to provide health care benefits. Small businesses do not have the resources a large corporation does with respect to the job protection provision. PFML benefits were only payable for 60 days before the pandemic hit Washington. There is concern with changing a carefully balanced law that is only two-years-old, and not brought to the advisory committee. The close affinity language in the definition of family member is too expansive. There is concern about expansion and what that will do to coverage in cities relating to employee absences. The expansion of medical benefits is a significant and expensive change. PFML is not ready to become a catch-all leave program.

**Persons Testifying:** PRO: Senator June Robinson, Prime Sponsor; Marilyn Watkins, Economic Opportunity Institute; Linet Madrona-Bravo, citizen; Andrea Schmitt, Columbia Legal Services; Sybill Hyppolite, Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO; Laura Beal, citizen; Linet Madeja-Bravo, Member of MomsRising.

CON: Bob Battles, Association of Washington Business; Christine Brewer, Brewer Public Affairs; Julia Gorton, Washington Hospitality Association; Tammie Hetrick, Washington Food Industry Association; Candice Bock, Association of Washington Cities; Gary Smith, Independent Business Association.

**Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying:** No one.