

# Policy Spotlight: Place-Based Storytelling About Time To Care



A Tip Sheet for Storytellers on Re-Scripting Gender, Work, Family, and Care from New America's Better Life Lab Entertainment Initiative

**Most people in the United States do not have guaranteed access to paid leave. Some states do better. Access — or lack of access — to paid leave shapes people's stories.**

## U.S. Policy Context

- The U.S. has ZERO paid sick days and ZERO weeks of paid family and medical leave guaranteed at the national level for workers in the private and nonprofit sectors. Many federal employees have 12 weeks of paid leave to care for a new child and they also earn paid sick leave.
- Just 27% of workers in the U.S. have paid family leave through their jobs to care for a new child or seriously ill loved one. About 60% of the lowest-paid workers in the U.S. do not have even a single paid sick day.
- Fewer than 60% of U.S. workers have unpaid, job-protected leave through the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). Rural workers, immigrants, low-wage workers, and people with disabilities are even less likely to be covered by unpaid FMLA leave.
- When people do not have paid leave, they may face financial, health, and caregiving challenges; let health issues go untreated; face stress and conflict; and often just muddle through. They may also tend to feel alone and frustrated by lack of support.
- In contrast, access to paid leave is associated with better maternal and child health; better compliance with recommended guidelines for preventive health screenings; greater involvement of fathers in babies' lives; higher wages for women; and higher rates of worker retention in businesses.

## Five Themes for Paid Leave Storytelling Integrations

1. **Normalize people taking paid leave to care for themselves and their loved ones.** This can include anything from someone talking about or asking for leave at work, to talking about it with friends, family or neighbors, to chronicling a character's leave experience. It could also include showing a character filling out an online application for a statewide paid family and medical leave program or advocating for public policies at the local, state, or federal levels.
2. **Show what it looks like to be proud of taking time to provide or receive care.** Stories that call into question culturally-ingrained habits of expressing shame or apologizing for taking time away from work, or having to work harder upon a return to work, are also terrific. Even a couple of lines of reflective dialogue are a perfect way to do this.
3. **Compare the tangible differences for characters in states that provide paid leave compared to states without such policies.** Include references or depictions that show how access to paid leave can decrease stress, improve health outcomes, and make a person's return to their job more likely, whereas the inability to access paid leave is associated with the opposite.
4. **Show supportive employers and co-workers who facilitate colleagues taking paid leave, and affirm the importance of providing or receiving care.** Use characters who are bosses or business owners to explain that paid leave is associated with improved productivity, profitability and retention of workers.
5. **Contextualize pregnancy decisions by referring to access to paid leave, child care, and other supports** — or, more often, the lack of these supportive policies.

For more suggestions, see Storyline Partners & New America Better Life Lab, [Paid Family and Medical Leave Reader for Writers](#) (2023).

## About Us

The Re-Scripting Gender, Work, Family, and Care initiative at New America's Better Life Lab marries policy, research, and narrative expertise to help advance gender equity and work-family justice in TV, film, and pop culture. Contact Vicki Shabo ([shabo@newamerica.org](mailto:shabo@newamerica.org)), for more information. Visit <http://newamerica.org/entertainment> for additional resources.



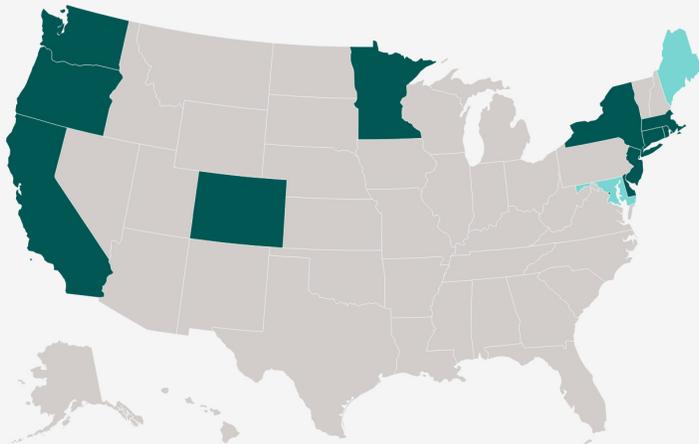


## Paid Family and Medical Leave

**What is this?** State laws guaranteeing workers up to a few months away from work to: address a serious personal illness, injury, or disability; care for a loved one with a serious health issue; bond with a newborn, adopted, or foster child; or address the deployment of a service member. Worker and/or employer payroll deductions fund the programs, which are administered through a state agency or an approved employer plan. Outside of states with programs, most workers are not guaranteed paid family or medical leave, and there are large disparities by job, industry, wage level, race, ethnicity, and in rural vs. metro areas.

### States with comprehensive paid family and medical leave programs

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Programs in California, Colorado, Connecticut, D.C., Delaware, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island and Washington are fully implemented. In addition, new programs in the process of implementation will begin paying benefits as follows: Maine (May 2026), Maryland (January 2028).

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Paid family and medical leave is guaranteed through state programs or requirements in California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington, and Washington, D.C.

Laws are in the process of being implemented in Maine (May 2026) and Maryland (January 2028).

Campaigns to win new paid family and medical leave programs are underway in Hawaii, Illinois, Michigan, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, with emerging efforts in other U.S. states, including Kansas and Oklahoma.

There are also federal proposals to expand access to paid family and medical leave nationwide, including creating a national paid family and medical leave program.

### What paid family and medical leave integration could look like in storytelling:

- Character(s) discussing their plans for paid leave when expecting a new baby or adopting a child in a state. When both parents take paid leave, either together or one and then the other, they each get a chance to bond with their baby and to see that parental leave is not a vacation, as critics often claim.
- A character who is caring for a very ill family member takes paid leave to care for them, which results in fewer health complications, better recovery times, and somewhat less stress on the caregiver. Consider contrasts with characters' other family members who live in a different state and either aren't able to help with caring for loved ones or make financial and job sacrifices to when taking time to care.
- A character faces a personal health crisis. Paid medical leave eases their stress and makes it easier to get the treatment they need and focus on recovery. This can be a learning experience for the character and their loved ones, their co-workers, their boss, and storyworld characters with other experiences.
- A service member needs to deploy. Their partner can take paid family leave to address new child care needs or other logistics.

For more information about specific laws, contact us or refer to: V. Shabo, Better Life Lab at New America, [Paid and Unpaid Leave Policies in the United States \(2026\)](#) and [Paid Leave Benefits and Funding in the United States \(2026\)](#).