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Employers, costs kill paid sick leave bill

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A state bill to guarantee paid days off for sick workers died Thursday amid opposition from business lobbyists and lawmaker concern that the benefit was too costly.

The bill would have granted employees of small companies in California up to five days of paid sick leave each year. Workers at larger firms could take up to nine days a year.

An estimated 6 million California workers -- about 40% of the state's workforce -- do not have the right to take a day of paid sick leave to recuperate from an illness or injury, see a doctor or care for a family member.

Small businesses and their lobbyists who fought the sick-leave measure said they were relieved that it failed. They estimated that the bill would cost 370,000 jobs in California and would burden employers with \$4.6 billion in new costs over a five-year period.

The bill "unfairly presumed that small-business owners are able to provide paid sick leave and don't want to," said John Kabeteck, executive director of the National Federation of Independent Businesses. "That couldn't be further from the truth. The fact is that many want to but simply can't afford it."

The bill, SB 2716, got sidetracked for this legislative session when the Senate Appropriations Committee stalled its progress because it was too expensive.

The defeat occurred despite having strong popular backing, said its author, Assemblywoman Fiona Ma (D-San Francisco). In a recent Field Research Corp. poll, nearly three out of four California voters surveyed backed the idea.

One sticking point for the bill was the estimated cost of enforcement and the requirement that the state government would be required to pay substantial sums to some state workers not currently eligible for sick pay.

Ma blamed her defeat on lawmakers' reluctance to approve new spending when the state government faces a \$15.2-billion budget deficit. "We couldn't afford to pay for it this year," she said.

Ma vowed to try to pass a similar bill next year.

If the proposal had become law, California would have been the first state in the nation to provide universal paid sick leave. But it would have eroded the state's ability to attract new employers, said state Chamber of Commerce President Allan Zaremberg. Ma's proposal was high on the influential business lobby's annual list of "job killer" bills.

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