

Use of Washington’s Paid Family and Medical Leave for Caregiver and Child Mental and Behavioral Health

Background

Essentials for Childhood (EfC) is a statewide initiative working to reduce and prevent child maltreatment, promote health equity, and strengthen community supports for children and families. A key EfC strategy is promoting family economic stability.¹ For example, family-friendly workplace policies like paid leave strengthen a household’s financial security and increase caregiver time and capacity to foster supportive family relationships.

Implementation Evaluation Activities

In spring 2023, EfC partnered with the University of Washington and the Washington State Employment Security Department on an implementation evaluation. The project’s objective was to understand how Washington’s Paid Family and Medical Leave (Paid Leave) program promotes child and family health and well-being including mental and behavioral health.

The project centered the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), people who have low incomes, and families living in rural areas. Due to factors like systemic racism, sexism, underinvestment in infrastructure and education, and a variety of other discriminations these communities often have worse health outcomes and face difficulty accessing resources. As a result, these communities are more likely to experience financial hardship and health risks including less access to well-paying jobs, affordable healthcare, and educational opportunities.

Project activities included:

- An online survey to explore the circumstances of leave-taking completed by 4,710 people.²
- Virtual interviews with 31 survey participants to understand the supports and barriers to taking paid leave for their own or a child’s mental or behavioral health condition.

Sample of Survey Respondents

Survey Sample Description			
	%		%
Gender Identity		Annual Family Income	
Female	70	<\$50,000	29
Male	26	\$50,000-\$99,999	36
Non-Binary	<1	\$100,000-\$199,999	23
		\$200,000 or more	06
Age		Race/Ethnicity	
18-34	18	Asian/Asian-American	10
35-54	72	American Indian/Native	03
55+	09	American/Alaska Native	00
		Black/African-American	07
County		Hispanic/Latinx	17
Rural	22	White/European American	59
Urban	70	Other	04
Outside WA	02		
N		4,710	

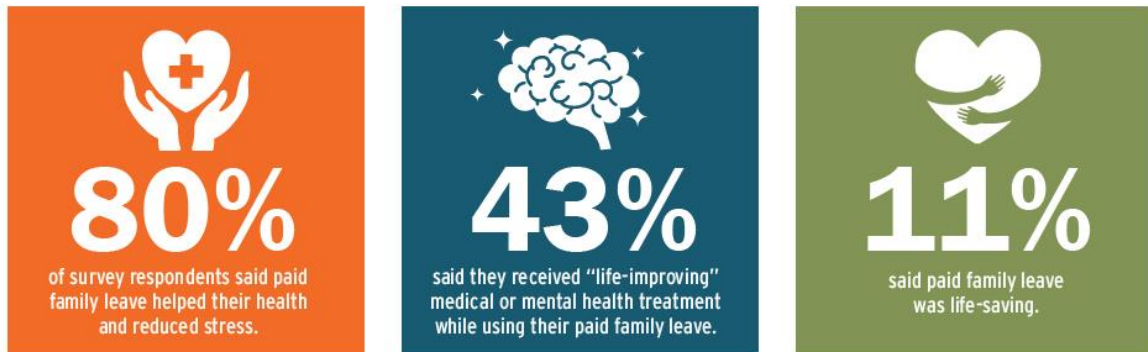
Interview Sample Description			
	%		%
Gender Identity		Annual Family Income	
Female	80	<\$50,000	23
Male	10	\$50,000-\$99,999	48
Non-Binary	10	\$100,000-\$199,999	29
		\$200,000 or more	00
Age		Race/Ethnicity	
18-34	06	White	65
35-54	84	BIPOC	35
55+	10		
County		Industry	
Rural	26	Education	16
Urban	74	Health care	29
		Social services	19
Type of Leave		All other	35
Family care	40		
Medical	60		
N		31	

¹ EfC is administered through the Washington State Department of Health (DOH) and supported with funds from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). DOH received CDC funding from September 2013 – December 2023 to implement EfC.

² Online surveys were completed by adults with children under the age of 18 living in the home and had taken leave for medical or caregiving reasons since January 2021.

Select Study Findings

Participants described paid medical and family care leave as “lifesaving,” “life changing,” and “health promoting.”



Interviewees described the impacts to individual and family well-being:

“Oh, well, honestly, I truly know if I hadn't been there, my son would have reattempted [suicide] and probably wouldn't be here today... That's what [paid leave] meant for us. It really, genuinely saved my son's life, you know?”

“So yes, I did have time to like, during those months off, I did have time to work out and to go to therapy and to, like, take the medicine, I did all of those things. But I think what's important is that I'm still doing them. Like, I got back on track, I got to a really healthy place...[b]eing able to take time off, like it literally changed my life. Like it changed my brain, I went back to who I normally am... happy, and um capable...I have energy to play with my kids and enjoy them. And I like my husband and I like my job. And you know, I'm a top performer instead of someone who's about to get fired. I don't have headaches every day which is incredible. So, I mean, it's a 180.”

Looking Ahead

The implementation evaluation project offers insights into the intersection between income support programs and family well-being. EfC is currently working to:

- Share the implementation evaluation report with partners. This will help us learn how the findings may be used to inform state and community-level actions like efforts to promote using paid leave benefits for mental and behavioral health conditions.
- Support activities that improve access and participation in paid leave benefits, including increasing statewide outreach.
- Coordinate and collaborate with partners to bring together learnings across projects to improve systems.

To learn more about the implementation evaluation or request the report, please email [Angie Funaiote](mailto:Angie.Funaiote), Child Health Supervisor, Thriving Children and Youth.



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