FORWARD with HOPE

for Family-Friendly Workplace Policies

An excerpted brief from the full ‘Forward with Hope’ report, focused on Paid Family and Medical Leave

Written by: Nina Tracy, MSW & Melea Rose-Waters, MSW
Edited by: Elizabeth Fowler

Prevent Child Abuse
North Carolina

March 2023
## Table of Contents

Table of Contents .................................................................................................................................................2  
Introduction ...........................................................................................................................................................3  
Family-Friendly Workplace Policies..................................................................................................................4  
  What are Family-Friendly Workplace Policies? ...........................................................................................4  
  What is Paid Family and Medical Leave? .........................................................................................................4  
  Benefits of Paid Family and Medical Leave .....................................................................................................4  
  Access to Paid Leave ........................................................................................................................................5  
  Paid Family and Medical Leave in North Carolina Could Save Infant Lives ............................................6  
  Progress on Paid Family and Medical Leave in North Carolina .................................................................6  
  Paid Family and Medical Leave in the United States ..................................................................................7  

### The Study: Policymaker Perspectives on Child Maltreatment Prevention in NC ......................... 8  
  Study Background ...............................................................................................................................................8  
  Phase I Pilot .......................................................................................................................................................8  
  Phase II Study ...................................................................................................................................................8  
  Study Sample Demographics .........................................................................................................................9  

Findings on Paid Family & Medical Leave (PFML) .......................................................................................10  
  Overall Familiarity with PFML .......................................................................................................................10  
  Paid Leave & Prevention ...............................................................................................................................11  
  Paid Leave Concerns .......................................................................................................................................13  
  Participant Ratings of PFML ...........................................................................................................................15  
  Paid Leave's Path Forward ...............................................................................................................................18  
  Paid Leave Implications ................................................................................................................................17  

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................................19  
References ...........................................................................................................................................................20
Introduction

Child abuse, neglect, and dependency — often referred to collectively as child maltreatment — refer to a set of adversities experienced by young people that include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; physical, educational, emotional, supervisory, and medical neglect; and dependency, where a young person either has no caregiver or their caregiver is unable to provide the child with the care that they need.

In the United States, about 15% of children are estimated to experience child abuse or neglect annually, and about 25% of children are believed to experience child abuse or neglect at some point in their childhood¹. In North Carolina, 4.34% of children were assessed for allegations of abuse and neglect in 2020 alone² – data which may be an underestimate given limited interactions with families during the pandemic. Child maltreatment can result in negative outcomes across the lifespan of a child and their family, with immediate, short-term, and life-long impacts. These impacts manifest in a variety of ways at the individual, family, community, and society levels.

Children of color are also disproportionately impacted by the child welfare system. Black children represented 14% of the US child population in 2020³, yet 23% of the foster care population⁴. Similarly, Indigenous children (counted as American Indian and Alaskan Native) were 1% of the US child population in 2020⁵, yet 2% of the foster care population⁶. BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) children are also disproportionately affected by encounters earlier in the child welfare system. While about a quarter of all children (26.3%) are estimated to experience a Child Protective Services (CPS) investigation by their 18th birthday, this rate is nearly double for Black and Indigenous (Native American) children (46.8% and 50.2%, respectively)⁷.

Child abuse and neglect, as well as family separation by placement into the foster care system can result in a child experiencing chronic, toxic stress. Chronic stress can result in an allostatic load that has lasting, harmful effects on the child’s development reverberating into adulthood with impacts on the individual’s immune system, self-regulation of emotions, and biological responses to stress leading either to an overactive or dampened stress response⁸. Children who have experienced abuse or neglect on average tend to have lower educational attainment, employment, and earnings. They also experience higher rates of substance use disorders and mental health diagnoses than those who did not experience child abuse or neglect ⁹.

Policymakers carry the responsibility of ensuring that public investments improve the lives of children, families, and the communities they live in. Implementing research-backed policies and programs that have been shown to prevent child abuse and neglect can have both immediate and long-term positive impacts. Policymakers cannot be expected to be experts in every topic, and they rely on researchers, constituents, the populations they serve, staff, colleagues, and their own personal experiences to inform their decision-making process.

Home visiting and parenting education programs are one promising strategy for supporting families and preventing child maltreatment, but significant investments are needed in order for these programs to reach all of the families who could benefit from their services. One of the questions explored by the Policymaker Perspectives on Child Maltreatment Prevention in NC study team was “What are NC policymaker perceptions of polices that have been linked to primary prevention and the potential paths forward for these policies?” This exploration covered both family-friendly workplace policies and investments in home visiting and parenting education.
Family-Friendly Workplace Policies

What are Family-Friendly Workplace Policies?
Family-friendly workplace policies improve the balance between work and family while ensuring family economic security. They typically fall into two different categories – ones that are offered by workplaces or employers and those that are government policies. Both make it possible for employees to balance family and work more easily. Different types of family-friendly policies include fair and flexible scheduling, paid sick days, on-site childcare, pregnancy and lactation accommodations, and paid family and medical leave.

What is Paid Family and Medical Leave?
Paid family and medical leave provides job protections and full or partial wage replacement for employees who need to take time off from work to welcome a new child into the family, or to take care of longer-term medical needs for themselves or a member of their family (biological or chosen).

Benefits of Paid Family and Medical Leave
A growing body of research has documented the benefits of family-friendly policies like paid family and medical leave for both employees and employers. These benefits include reduced stress, improved economic stability, increased employee productivity, and improved employer recruitment and retention. Financial insecurity is a common source of parental stress, which in turn leads to a greater likelihood of child maltreatment. Concrete supports for families in times of need, particularly economic supports, is a critical policy to support the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

Paid family leave has been linked to a significant reduction in hospital admissions for Abusive Head Trauma. Abusive Head Trauma, also known as Shaken Baby Syndrome, is the leading cause of physical child abuse deaths in children under five in the United States. Babies less than one year old are at the greatest risk of injury from Abusive Head Trauma, and it accounts for about one-third of all child maltreatment deaths.
Access to Paid Leave

As of March 2021, between 7% and 40% of civilian workers in the US had access to paid family leave. The large discrepancy can be explained by the wage categories reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), ranging from lowest 10% of earners to highest 10% of earners – see the chart below based on BLS data.

The highest 10% of earners have the largest proportion of paid leave at 40%, while the lowest 10% have only 7% — arguably the group that can least afford to take unpaid leave. The lowest wage category makes $12.00/hour (or $24,960 gross salary) while the highest makes $51.59/hour (or $107,307.20 annual gross salary). The current minimum wage in North Carolina is $7.25/hour.

Overall, 23% of civilian workers had access to paid family leave in 2021, while the overwhelming majority – 89% – had access to unpaid leave. Interestingly, the same percentages applied to private industry workers. The percentage of people who had access to paid family leave was slightly better for state and local government workers at 26%, while 94% of these workers had access to unpaid family leave.

---

a Per the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: “Statistics for private industry and state and local government are published separately and then combined to measure the civilian economy. Excluded from the civilian economy are workers employed in federal government and quasi-federal agencies, military personnel, agricultural workers, volunteers, unpaid workers, individuals receiving long-term disability compensation, and those working overseas. In addition, private industry excludes workers in private households, the self-employed, workers who set their own pay... and family members paid token wages.”
Paid Family and Medical Leave in North Carolina Could Save Infant Lives

A 2019 study from the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy found that a paid family and medical leave insurance program in North Carolina would reduce infant mortality, nursing home costs, and use of government assistance. The research projected that a program offering 12 weeks leave with 80% wage replacement would:

- save 26 infant lives in North Carolina each year;
- keep 205 individuals out of nursing home care each year, cutting costs by between $16.7 million and $18.6 million;
- reduce the number of individuals needing public assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program by 956, saving $451,232 to $780,096 in North Carolina's TANF costs annually; and
- provide meaningful support for families addressing a loved one's opioid or other substance abuse addiction.

Progress on Paid Family and Medical Leave in North Carolina

According to a 2017 survey conducted by the NC Early Childhood Foundation and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina, employers and workers in North Carolina agreed family-friendly workplace policies are good for businesses and families. 94% of employees agreed that family-friendly practices give employers a competitive edge in attracting and retaining employees, and 71% of employers saw a high upside to these types of policies, with very little negative impact.

Despite the potential benefits for children, families, and employers, North Carolina has made minimal progress toward passing paid family and medical leave that is accessible, meaningful, affordable, and inclusive. In 2019, Governor Roy Cooper signed Executive Order 95, which provides paid parental leave to some state employees, and includes most governmental agencies under his purview. These agencies include the Office of Administrative Hearings, Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Office of the Commissioner of Banks, Office of the Secretary of State, Office of the State Auditor, Office of the State Controller, Department of Public Instruction, Department of Labor, Department of Justice, and The Administrative Office of the Courts.

The NC Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance Act (H597/S564) was introduced in the North Carolina General Assembly 2021 legislative session, but neither the House nor Senate version made it out of committee for a hearing. At the time of writing this report, 23 counties and municipalities across the state have passed paid leave policies for City and County employees. In July 2022, the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools District implemented a paid parental leave policy for their teachers and staff as a recruitment and retention strategy, becoming potentially the first school district in NC to adopt a paid leave policy.
Paid Family and Medical Leave in the United States

Nationally, eleven states and Washington D.C. have passed paid family and medical leave laws, and while there have been efforts to introduce bills in Congress, such as the FAMILY Act[^10], the US remains the only of 41 industrialized nations in a Pew Research Center study that offers no paid leave[^11]. See below for a map of current US states with paid family and medical leave laws, from A Better Balance[^32].

In 2020, paid family and medical leave was included as part of President Joe Biden’s response to the COVID-19 crisis in the Build Back Better framework[^33]. Build Back Better was slated to be the largest, most comprehensive investment in social, infrastructural, and environmental programs since the 1930’s New Deal in response to the Great Depression[^34]. The paid leave provisions passed the House and were later removed in the Senate version of the bill. President Joe Biden’s 2023 proposed budget includes provisions for a comprehensive 12-week paid family and medical leave program, demonstrating some hope for the policy to remain in the forefront of budget negotiations[^35].

The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 provides a limited subset of the workforce with 12 weeks of job-protected, unpaid parental and medical leave[^36]. However, this leave remains inaccessible to many, as those in low-wage-earning jobs, members of racial and ethnic minorities, people with lower educational attainment, and those who are not married are more often unable to afford unpaid time off from work[^37]. In North Carolina specifically, the leave protections under FMLA are not accessible to about 61% of the working population[^38].
The Study: Policymaker Perspectives on Child Maltreatment Prevention in NC

Study Background

Phase I Pilot
The project was designed based on the Bellwether Methodology, developed by the Harvard Family Research Project. A phase I pilot study was conducted in Fall 2020 through Spring 2021 to test the project’s methods, identify edits to the research and interview questions, and troubleshoot any potential challenges with the design ahead of embarking on the full study, or phase II. During the pilot phase, an initial interview guide was drafted following the funnel format typical to the Bellwether Method and reviewed with two state legislators — a Republican and a Democrat — for feedback. Adjustments were made to that version of the interview guide before it was tested in phase 1 pilot interviews with participants. For the pilot, eligible participants were elected officials serving on town/municipal councils or boards, including mayors, or elected officials serving on county commissioner boards. These participants were also sampled following the Bellwether Method.

The four revised research questions used for the second phase of the study were:

1. What do North Carolina policymakers know about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), adverse community experiences, social drivers of health (SDOHs), and their impacts on health and well-being?
2. What do NC policymakers know about primary prevention of child abuse and neglect, and how is primary prevention connected to their role?
3. What sources of information and beliefs influence NC policymakers’ decision making?
4. What are NC policymaker perceptions of polices that have been linked to primary prevention and the potential paths forward for these policies?

These questions were designed to fulfill the project’s overall goal of identifying the challenges and opportunities for policy work around child maltreatment prevention, addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences, Social Drivers/Determinants of Health, and informing advocacy strategies around paid family and medical leave and home visiting and parenting education. Questions specific to home visiting and parenting education were encompassed within the fourth research question.

Phase II Study
This study was reviewed and approved under expedited review by Salus IRB for Protocol 1A. Phase II of the study utilized interview data collected by the research team between November 2021 and February 2022. Eligible participants for phase II of the study were North Carolina policymakers at the state or local level. For the purposes of this study, “policymakers” was a term defined to be inclusive of policy-creators (e.g., legislators, council members, other elected officials), policy-implementers (e.g., leaders in various state agencies and entities), and policy-influencers (i.e., individuals with influence and sway over what policies are adopted and implemented).

The research team conducted 26 interviews with policymakers in North Carolina over the course of four months. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, following the interview guide while leaving room for adaptation to follow the natural course of the conversations. The interviews focused on many topics, covered in more detail in the full Forward with Hope report. One of the areas discussed was home visiting and parenting education — the focus of this specific report.
Study Sample Demographics

Twenty-six total policymakers participated in this project. Participants came from across the state, with representation of each of the four regions assigned as “Western,” “Central,” “Triangle,” and “Eastern” as divided below:

Of those interviewed, 19% were from Eastern NC, 38% from the Triangle region, 35% from Central NC, and 8% from Western NC. The participants were also asked demographic questions about how they self-identified in a variety of categories. See table below for the demographic breakdown for the sample:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEMOGRAPHICS</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American, Black, Afro–Caribbean</td>
<td>8 (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White or Caucasian</td>
<td>17 (65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17 (65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Government/Other Work Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local (County or Municipal)</td>
<td>7 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>19 (73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elected Office</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16 (62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10 (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NC Region</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern</td>
<td>5 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triangle</td>
<td>10 (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>9 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td>2 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Political Party</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>5 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>18 (69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>2 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaffiliated</td>
<td>1 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seniority (Years in Position)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New (0–2 years)</td>
<td>9 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-level (3–8 years)</td>
<td>10 (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior (9+)</td>
<td>7 (27)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings on Paid Family & Medical Leave (PFML)

Overall Familiarity with PFML

Before exploring perceptions of paid family and medical leave specifically, participants were asked their thoughts on "family-friendly workplace policies." Many – 18 of the 26 – participants discussed paid leave, parental leave, family leave, or another version of the same policy in response to this question, indicating success by advocates in linking paid leave to being a family-friendly workplace policy. For multiple, PFML was the very first thing they thought of when hearing the term. For example, one responded with "I think of generous postnatal, postpartum leave where people get paid after they have a baby, either the mother or the father... I also think about being able to take leave if you have a parent who's severely ill, who's had surgery, something like that..." Another explicitly stated, "First and foremost, I think of paid parental leave, and paid leave for caregiving..."

For the most part, participants were relatively familiar with 'paid leave' as a concept when asked to define it. However almost all participants described it using general terms and did not seem to know of the type of policy that advocates have been working toward in NC, which is PFML that offers 12 weeks of leave, with job protections, sufficient wage replacement, inclusive definitions, and uses an insurance model. For example, one responded to the question about how they would define paid family and medical leave as, "I'm not really up on all of that kind of stuff. I've never practiced in employment law. And that's more of a federal level question," and another participant explained,

"This is outside of my area of expertise, but I would define it as there'd probably be some policy implemented in the workplace where a triggering event would allow you to have a leave period where you would continue to be paid and there be a guarantee that your job would still be there for you when you return from leave, and that you wouldn't be placed in any kind of disadvantage for taking the leave."

This second participant, despite their disclaimer that paid leave is outside their expertise, actually does touch on a few key components of a comprehensive PFML policy. There were also some participants who seemed more familiar with paid leave policy specifics, such as one who stated, "It would be money, and it would be that your job would be guaranteed to be held for you and paid for a certain period of time. At the moment, right now... I would think at least three months would be a baseline for what we should get in this country." Here, they are referencing some of the important components of a comprehensive PFML policy, such as 12 weeks (three months) of leave and job protections while taking leave – which the prior participant above also mentioned.

Additionally, a few participants referenced 'FMLA', or the Family and Medical Leave Act, when answering questions regarding paid leave. The leave provided under FMLA is limited in scope, only covering employees in larger companies, and offering job protections for 12 weeks but with no pay. It is unclear whether these participants were using 'FMLA' to refer to the model that they prefer, or if they were simply referencing the existing program with which they were familiar, to mean family and medical leave generally.

Multiple participants connected their familiarity and perceptions of paid leave to personal experiences that they had with taking leave – most often parental leave, but also other forms. Those who had not had access to paid leave spoke of the challenges they faced as a result, while those who had been provided with paid leave spoke to the benefits of it. One such participant who did not have paid leave described how, "When I was pregnant with my... kids, we didn't have
paid parental leave in North Carolina. I had to use all of my sick leave and all of my vacation week that I accrued... It meant that I had to work overtime in order to accrue that.” Another spoke about the financial stress and health impacts of taking unpaid leave, explaining how, “I think about when I had a newborn, and I didn’t have paid parental leave. It was unpaid, and for eight weeks I had no income. Fortunately, we prepared for that, but still, it’s very stressful. And how that impacted everything from my own sleep to nursing a baby was not healthy for [the baby].” In contrast, a participant who did have access to paid leave spoke about the physical and professional benefits of the leave, noting that,

“So, in all transparency, I took advantage of paid parental leave when my second child was born and enjoyed that time very much. It was definitely appreciated, because there wasn’t a lot of sleep at the time with an older one and an infant... And so, I think just giving families the time to adapt and adjust to that new environment at home, 1) Can make a huge difference in the workplace, because obviously... I certainly felt some appreciation and some loyalty to the company for being able to do that. And then, I also felt like I wasn’t just pushing through work that maybe wouldn’t have been as good at that point in time, because my focus really was elsewhere. And so, I appreciated that time to be able to take that and to do that.”

As in the above quotation, a few spoke about how the type of leave they were offered impacted decisions that they had made professionally about staying in or leaving jobs. The above participant felt deepened loyalty to their company for having access to leave, while another explained how they stayed in a job as, “When I had... my kids, I got four and a half months paid... it’s frankly one of the reasons I stayed in [the job] as long as I did.”

**Paid Leave & Prevention**

When asked about how family-friendly workplace policies — specifically paid leave — prevent child maltreatment, the mechanisms described most often were: enabling safer care arrangements; allowing time for bonding; and providing a safety valve to minimize the stress experienced by families. Some, but not all participants were able to describe a connection between paid leave and the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

Speaking about safer care arrangements, one described how, “I think it would dramatically decrease both [child abuse and neglect] because instead of leaving a child possibly alone or with a person that’s questionable, the person...the mother or father themselves could stay home and take care of the child.” Expanding on this, another described, “But, when you’re young and desperate and you don’t think you have a lot of options, you’re gonna make some really compromised choices, right. And, to me, neglect and abuse come in a lot of different forms.” Both of these participants, along with others, focused on the risks posed to children by being placed in informal or inadequate care arrangements when parents do not have access to paid leave.

On the topic of time for bonding, a participant described the preventative impact of paid leave as, “Well, certainly, attachment is a big thing. If a parent can spend... it's just that time bonding and making a connection and an opportunity to create a relationship that hopefully can get them through those hard parenting [moments] and be enough to prevent [abuse and neglect].” This participant suggests that the bonding time allowed by paid leave leads to stronger parent-child attachments that protect against maltreatment. On the other side of the same concept, a participant described how a lack of paid leave may contribute to maltreatment as,

“I would say that because we don’t have adequate maternal and

“"Well, certainly, attachment is a big thing. If a parent can spend... it's just that time bonding and making a connection and an opportunity to create a relationship that hopefully can get them through those hard parenting and be enough to prevent [abuse and neglect]."
paternal leave after children are born, they’re not able to have that bonding time with the parent. And I think that makes a huge difference going forward. If you don’t have that dedicated time, both for the mother and the father and the child. I think it’s important for all of those people. It’s not just important for the baby. It’s important for the parents to feel that connection to the child and really just get their feet under them and figure out how to be a parent if it’s their first time.”

The last main theme that arose connecting paid leave to prevention was that it provided a form of safety valve for the stress that parents might be experiencing with a new child. Some described this as related to the pressure taken off by parents being able to be home while learning to care for a new child, while others connected it to easing a financial stressor on families – and some tied it to both factors. A participant described these (and more) ways in-depth that paid leave can ease stressors on families as,

“...if in the new time if you had two parents that were able to be home, as opposed to one, in those very early, exhausting days, that would be hugely impactful for families. But even in circumstances where there’s just one parent able to be home, and those are usually exhausting early days, to not have to worry about money, to not have to worry about if you’re going to be able to keep your kid insured and fed, or having to choose between keeping your kid insured and fed, and bonding and being with your kid – and again, we talked at the beginning about contributing factors – it’s stress. It’s economic stress, physical stress, emotional stress, postpartum issues, physically, when you’ve had a child. All of those factors can be lessened with paid leave, and just allows so much more flexibility... I could just think of so many different factors that are – your physical recovery and the connection to physical wellness, and mental wellness. If you’re not physically well, that might lead to not being able to deal with your circumstances, which could then lead to child maltreatment.”

A few did not see a clear connection between paid leave and the prevention of child maltreatment. For one, this perception seemed to be tied to a belief that it would take more than paid leave alone to solve, as they expressed that, “I don’t think that’s gonna make a difference in child abuse prevention. I mean, it might make them a little less stressed, but I don’t think that’s . . . I just don’t see it as a high thing that’s gonna make a difference.” But for two others, there was a perception that there is no connection between paid leave and child maltreatment prevention at all, as expressed by one who said,

“I don’t really see a correlation between the use or non-use of FMLA [the Family and Medical Leave Act] or any of those resources. I don’t see that directly correlating with the root causes of abuse or neglect... So, the parents that really... that want their children back, that are making the effort to communicate with the people that advocate for them, that are working for them, to get their children back, they do end up reunified. I mean, it takes some work... So, I don’t really see FMLA, or a company being family-friendly or not, being much of a barrier...”

Overall, there were a few participants who did not see any connection, but the majority of participants saw some connection between paid leave and preventing child maltreatment, whether through enabling safer care arrangements, allowing time for bonding, or providing an outlet to minimize the stress experienced by families.
Paid Leave Concerns

While most participants described benefits of family-friendly workplaces and paid leave, there were also some concerns expressed about paid leave. Common themes for concerns focused on the impact of paid leave on small businesses, the challenges some businesses face with hiring temporary replacement staff, the need for balance within policies, and a general concern about a policy being able to meet the differing and unique needs of various businesses and industries.

One key theme was a concern about the impact that a paid leave policy would have on small businesses, and related concerns about creating a ‘mandate’ on businesses. One offered their perspectives by describing,

“That’s a little difficult for me to put my arms around because I don’t wanna dictate to a business, necessarily, how they have to run their business. The state could be a little more subtle with a tax credit, or something within the business that makes it easier for them to do things like that. For those who do not have the financial resources, then it might be a role for the state to help funding some programs... one thing I’m very cautious about doing is laying more burdens upon business than are reasonable... And we’re coming off of this – I hope we’re coming off of this two-year pandemic, where some businesses have just closed permanently, others are still hanging on by a thread. So, let’s have the conversation about it but I’m not sure what we can get done legislatively right now.”

Another discussed challenges with replacing staff as, “I think the only concern I have is when we give paid leave... will employers have the resources to be able to add staff to pick up the work so that we can have that balance?... There has to be additional resources to be able to hire the people to have that balance.” A participant described the complexities of replacing staff and the differential impact for small versus large businesses as,

“So, I certainly think there’s value in doing and having [paid leave]. I don’t know that I have an opinion honestly on whether or not it should be required. I think there are certain circumstances and certain industries out there where it’s extremely difficult. So, for example, I own and operate [a small business]. I can’t just go off the shelf, find a six week or whatever replacement... And so, it makes it extremely hard for a business like
ours. There are businesses out there, large, corporate 500 companies that somebody could be gone for six weeks and they wouldn't really even notice. So, I definitely think there's a competitive advantage for those companies that can offer it and can afford to do so. For those smaller, I mean, especially the mom-and-pop shops and the other things that are out there, I mean it can be extremely hard. So, I don't know that there is a right answer on kind of forcing it, but I definitely think there’s value in having those programs.”

Here, the participant is expressing that they see benefits to offering paid leave at the same time as discussing the concerns and challenges they foresee with implementation.

One other concern mentioned by a participant is that people would abuse or misuse the program. Specifically, they explained, “we’ve seen it with FMLA, where people abuse it. And I mean, in my role, I’ve seen it a number of times, where people have abused it. They count down how many days they have, and then the next year, they’re looking at when that drops off so they can take it again. So, I think there has to be some really, really strict rules.”

‘Balance’ was a word that came up repeatedly in the discussions of paid leave. Most often, participants were speaking about the need to balance what they saw as competing needs for these policies, such as the needs of employees for balance between work and family, or the need for employers to have balance between financial sustainability and supporting their workforce. One participant spoke about their concerns with providing paid leave as an employer, connected to the concern described above about filling positions while staff are out on leave. They explained that, “I think for an employer it’s tough. Because quite honestly, we have all these contracts, and we still have to get the work done. So, it’s a matter of that balancing of how you’re gonna get the work done.” Another participant elaborated on challenges faced by employees and employers, describing,

“When you don’t have [paid leave], and the parent has to either resign and/or take leave without pay, then the family suffers immensely. So again, it’s a delicate balancing act. Right now, we’ve not had our state reach the level that I would like for them to reach when it comes to the benefits packages for parental leave... Do you do it? Do you not do it? And if you do decide to do it, how much time is equitable and fair?”

Despite these concerns, it’s notable that these participants did not seem to be clearly opposed leave, but instead believe in a need to account for the concerns they expressed, such as having balanced policies with well-defined rules and enforcement, so the program is not misused. Interestingly, even while discussing their concerns, participants repeatedly mentioned benefits of or positive sentiments about paid leave.
Participant Ratings of PFML

Participants were asked to rate what priority, on a scale from 1-10 (with 1 being lowest and 10 being highest), they felt that paid leave should be to the state of North Carolina. The largest portion participants rated paid leave as a high priority with ratings of 8/10 or higher, including multiple rating paid leave as a 10/10 priority. Many more rated paid leave as a medium priority, between 5/10 to 7/10. No participants rated paid leave below a ‘5/10’, however, four did not provide any clear rating.

Of the high ratings (8/10 to 10/10), many emphasized that paid leave is not a standalone issue and that there are other priorities at the same level of importance. Multiple participants specifically named health care access and Medicaid Expansion as a priority that they would rate similarly highly. One participant explained how they could not choose it alone as a top priority, commenting that “That’s a hard question, because I think it’s like a 10, but it’s also – I do have to give something else up to tell you it should be. I need a list of all the priorities in order to really rank them. I can’t rank it by itself, but it’s hugely important.” Another participant shared that their rationale for a high rating was based on paid leave being a workforce strategy, explaining, ‘I think it has to be a 10. I mean, if we’re really going to value our employees and again, I’m going to use that phrase, recruit and retain top talent. It has to be at the top of the priority list… We don’t want to lose really incredible talent to our state.”

Those who ranked paid leave as a medium priority, 5/10 to 7/10, often similarly acknowledged that there were many priorities needed in the state, and for these participants, paid leave did not rise to the very top of those priorities. One explained, “I don’t know if I can take [paid leave] alone because I think it has to be a piece of a package rather than just paid family leave. So, for that reason, I probably would put it at like seven… Might even be six now that I’m thinking about food and housing and everything else.” Others spoke about how it was a mid-level priority as they saw a need for balance in the policy, such as one who commented that, “So, it’s a balance because you wanna honor the commitments that these employees have to their families and how important that is, but you also have to balance that against we have to be good stewards of taxpayer resources.”

There were a few participants who did not provide a clear rating for how highly they would prioritize paid leave for the state. A couple explained their perceptions with comments such as, “I don’t feel like I’m qualified to answer that,” and ‘I would say it should be one of the things that is prioritized by an employer, but should it be – should paid FMLA be more important than a person being able to work in a non-hostile working environment? I don’t think so…” It is possible that some of these participants chose not to rate paid leave because they did not currently see it as a policy that should be implemented by the state, while others simply did not feel well enough informed about paid leave to make an assessment.

Paid Leave's Path Forward

Participants had many ideas for how to move paid leave forward, primarily falling into a few overall categories. The themes for paid leave’s path forward included keeping the conversation at the forefront, building momentum from the local and county levels, finding ways to build bridges to those who have expressed hesitation or opposition to paid leave so that they might support it, and exploring a policy for state employees.

When asked about the path forward for paid leave, some participants talked about how important it was to continue to talk about the need for a paid leave policy, especially after the recent potential for federal movement on the policy seems to have stalled. One expressed that, ‘Legislatively, we have to continue to fight for it. Those of us who are on board, we must continue to push it,” while another suggested, “Doing what y’all are doing. You’ve gotta keep talking about it. You’ve gotta keep pointing it out. You’ve gotta talk about it… But you’ve gotta let [elected leaders] know how it’s gonna benefit them.” While these two are talking about having advocates of the policy (including legislators) keep the conversation alive, another pointed out the importance of constituent voices. This participant explained a belief that,

“Well, one thing that would help is if a huge number of the constituents of people that are on…in the majority party which is the Republicans right now [in NC], emailed or called their legislator to express the desire for [paid leave]… it’s not a partisan issue, it affects every single person in the state... So, I think we need to get the word out and get folks to talk to their legislators.”
The voice of constituents is powerful, and this particular participant points out that paid leave is not a partisan issue—which held true amongst the sample of participants in this study. Participants across the political spectrum expressed that they believe in benefits offered by paid leave, and the differences between the major parties only became evident when discussing concerns related to the specifics of the mechanism by which a paid leave policy is implemented.

Connected to building constituents’ voices in support of paid leave, another theme that arose was the need to focus on building momentum for paid leave from the local and county level. There has been a growing movement toward adopting paid leave policies within individual businesses as well as local and county governments, as discussed above in the Progress on Paid Family and Medical Leave in North Carolina section. One participant explained how they imagine this strategy to move paid leave forward as, “I think as more and more counties do it, I think that it will catch on. Again, I think that we need to have additional resources to be able to do that. But I think it’s gonna become a norm.” This description ties with the advocacy approach where sustained and growing local action can further the conversation in state and federal government bodies.

Lastly, a theme arose that advocates need to work with businesses and other uncommon advocacy partners, including some of the groups that have historically complicated paid leave’s path. One participant suggested the path forward includes big companies and NC’s Chamber of Commerce publicly supporting a policy, saying,

“Getting the North Carolina Chamber of Commerce on board... I feel like if they spoke out and really got on board with this, they could get a lot of their members to get on board. I think that some of these newer companies that are coming into our state, like Apple and Google and Amazon. I think those big companies do support these types of policies, and I’m hoping that they can be also down at the legislature, talking to people... So, I think it’s really just a matter of getting the big players, the businesses, the corporations on board with it because [current supporters] talking about it, and people who don’t have the ear of leadership, is not probably going to be a path forward. We have to get people who do have their ear and will listen.”

Another spoke similarly about bringing businesses and Chambers of Commerce along, focusing specifically on smaller businesses explaining that,
“I think we need to start with small businesses and Chambers of Commerce. I think that big and large corporations can afford paid leave and they do, and that’s how they attract some of the best talent… What ends up happening is that people don’t even have that profit margin and choose that they just can’t do it. And so, I think we need to reframe the discussion around, ‘You can’t afford not to have paid leave, especially with regards to small businesses.’”

This participant then went on to describe how offering paid leave is an important recruitment and retention strategy for small businesses who are often acutely impacted by the costs of employee turnover.

Lastly, a legislator who was hesitant to mandate paid leave for the private sector (although supportive of approaches that might incentivize in the private sector) did suggest paid leave to be a policy that the state should consider. They expressed that,

“I think the state in and of itself is one of those – and I’ll call us kind of an employer, a large employer – where for the most part, we would have the opportunity to be able to absorb that, and to provide for that. And I think that’s something that the state should certainly be considering if we – to be honest, I don’t know what our policy is now, or if it varies based on agency and department from department. But it’s certainly something we should be looking at.”

Here, they discuss a possible path forward for paid leave that involves expanding access to those employed in state government roles. While some state employees currently have access to paid parental leave, as described in the Progress on Paid Family and Medical Leave in North Carolina section, not all do.

**PAID LEAVE IMPLICATIONS**

Family–friendly workplaces messaging has broken through – the majority of policymakers in this study identified paid family leave as a family–friendly workplace policy. Policymakers were also generally familiar with the concept of paid leave, but many were not very familiar with details of this policy or mechanisms by which this policy could be implemented broadly. This gap provides advocates an opportunity to educate policymakers on effective mechanisms for comprehensive paid leave policies, such as the insurance model, to increase understanding and decrease resistance.

People seemed to reference their own experiences with paid (or unpaid) leave when thinking about the policy. This may indicate that story sharing could be a particularly effective strategy in paid leave advocacy, tapping into shared experiences and encouraging empathetic mindsets. Most policymakers in this study seemed to understand many benefits of paid leave, including the recruitment and retention benefits for employers. These benefits can be highlighted to help find common ground.

Paid leave was most commonly understood to prevent child abuse by enabling safer care arrangements, allowing time for bonding, and providing a safety valve or outlet to minimize the stressors experienced by families. A few policymakers did not see a clear connection between paid leave and child maltreatment prevention. These may be helpful frames to use in communicating about the importance of paid leave with those who already see the connection, and in drawing connections for those who do not already see them.

As described, many of the participants discussed benefits or positive sentiments about the programs, even while discussing their concerns. This tension highlights that much of the challenge with paid leave may not necessarily be in convincing policymakers that it has benefits or positive impacts, but with providing a practical path forward that is not perceived as harmful to businesses and that suits businesses’ varying circumstances. Considering the frequent use of the word ‘balance’ to discuss considerations for paid leave policies, there may be an opportunity to talk about paid leave mechanisms that would provide balance — both for employees and for employers. One such way would be to focus on passing policies for governmental employees at various levels, while another would be to lean into the insurance model of paid leave that limits the burden on businesses and provides a fairer shot for smaller businesses to compete with large businesses in providing this important benefit.
Given the largely positive sentiment about what family and medical leave does for families and for businesses, there is an opportunity to encourage policymakers to move toward supporting, and ultimately acting on these policies. At the local level, this may involve building momentum for paid leave by supporting local (county and municipal) leaders in implementing paid leave in their communities, and at the state level, this could involve identifying new supporters for the policy on both sides of the aisle—especially amongst those who name families as important to them and central to their policymaking. Advocates can help also move paid leave forward by keeping the conversation about the importance of paid leave going publicly, working with the business community and Chambers of Commerce to identify and address their concerns with policy proposals, and exploring avenues for securing expanded access to paid leave for those employed in state government roles.
Conclusion

Child maltreatment can have devastating, lifelong consequences, and policymakers are key decision makers for public investments that can prioritize the prevention of abuse and neglect. However, these futures are not set, and policy approaches exist that have been demonstrated to improve outcomes and prevent child maltreatment — such as making investments in evidence-based early childhood home visiting and parenting education. Family-friendly workplace policies could improve the work and family balance for North Carolina families, reducing stressors and improving the likelihood that families will thrive. One key family-friendly workplace policy is paid family and medical leave, which improves family functioning, prevents child maltreatment, improves infant and maternal health, and increases worker retention.

‘Family-friendly workplace policies’ was a term that was recognized amongst policymakers in this study and appeared to be perceived positively by the participants. Nearly all identified paid leave as a family-friendly workplace policy. Policymakers in this study articulated benefits to paid leave, underlining that the challenge for enactment of such a policy broadly seemed to be primarily around the mechanism. Local advocacy, story sharing, and working with the business community appear to be a few of the promising approaches for building momentum on paid leave.

Paid family and medical leave can likely be moved forward toward enactment with continued attention, creative strategy, and coordinated efforts — see the Taking Action guide for a distilled selection of actionable items based on this study’s findings for paid leave and much more!
References

7. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306214
8. https://doi.org/10.1080/17470919.2016.1170725
9. https://doi.org/10.1017/S095457941100040X
15. https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/Abusive-Head-Trauma.html