



## Family leave program called not feasible

12/11/2005

By Caroline An, Staff Writer  
Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

CLAREMONT - While Californians give nearly 1 percent of their paychecks to State Disability Insurance, it appears only a small fraction of eligible workers use - or intend to use - the state's Paid Family Leave Program.

A year-long study conducted by the Berger Institute for Work, Family and Children at Claremont McKenna College examined the effects of the program.

More than 95 percent of more than 300 people surveyed held favorable views of the program, but the majority, particularly, low-income families, felt they couldn't afford to care for an ill family member while receiving up to 55 percent of their salaries from the state.

"When you're paycheck to paycheck, the idea of half a paycheck is just not feasible," said Donna Benton of the Los Angeles Caregiver Resource Center.

Some caregivers have no choice but to leave the care recipient at home without proper supervision.

"The quality of care is reduced because caregivers will leave their loved ones unattended for a period of time," said Adrianna Bailey, assistant director at the Inland Caregiver Resource Center.

Sherylle Tan, associate director at the Berger Institute, said that financial difficulty is a primary concern for low-income caregivers.

"These caregivers are already stretching their salary as much as they can," Tan said.

California is the first state to enact a paid family leave law, which took effect on July 1, 2004. Under the law, California workers who pay into the State Disability Insurance are provided up to 55 percent of their paycheck while taking up to six weeks of leave to care for a seriously ill family member or new child.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 22.4 million people assume an informal caregiver role to a spouse or parent -- many of these care givers are also balancing full- or part-time jobs. The state's program is designed to be a short-term solution -- assisting employees caring for a family member recovering from an operation or extended illness, or to bond with a child.

Locally, care givers give high marks to the state program. Gayle Shuey of Rialto has been caring for her 82-year-old mother, who suffers from dementia, since May. Shuey took advantage of the Family Leave program early on -- and feels fortunate to have a strong support system in her siblings -- but admits there have been some difficult moments.

"The biggest feeling is that I'm overwhelmed," she said. "I love doing what I'm doing but I have no personal time. However, I wouldn't give it up."

In addition to her siblings, who rotate caring for her mother on the weekends, she has hired a care giver who watches her mother while she is at work. Shuey is aware of health problems that can come with care giving and makes extra efforts to incorporate a proper diet and exercise in her day.

With few moments of personal time available, Shuey has sought advice from local support groups and friends who are care givers when she is having difficulty caring for her mother. She believes this experience has only been a

benefit.

"It's very satisfying knowing I can give back to my mother," she said. "It has helped me be happier with life."

Care giver advocates say that the low number of participants and potential participants in the state's program is due to a number of factors, including a lack of education about the program, and employers not providing enough information or support to care givers. The study also reported that 44 percent of respondents were familiar with the program; investigators noted that many participants were hearing about the state's program for the first time.

"The program is under-utilized because people don't understand how it works," Benton said. A common misconception is that care givers have to take the six weeks at once. They can take time off in smaller increments, such as two weeks at a time.

For many working care givers, the fear of taking the six weeks off is job loss when they return, she said. Nearly 25 percent of participants reported fearing job loss if they took paid time off. Additionally, self-employed care givers were concerned about revenue loss as well as an increased workload.

Care-giver advocates attribute the stress of juggling work and caring for a family member for deteriorating health conditions among care givers. These problems include heart disease, high blood pressure, depression and anxiety, Benton said. These problems were echoed by study participants -- many reported they were suffering from symptoms of depression and feeling emotionally and physically drained.

To ensure that more Californians rely on the state's program for assistance, care givers' concerns must be addressed not only by the government but by society. The Berger Institute reports that by 2010, nearly 30 percent of the population is expected to be over the age of 65, and the number of care givers will grow.

"We'll be more than doubling the people who are care givers or who will need care givers," Benton said.

"We have older people living longer," she said, adding that means an increase in two populations that are potentially fatal to each other.

*Caroline An can be reached by email at [caroline.an@dailybulletin.com](mailto:caroline.an@dailybulletin.com) or by phone at (909) 483-8553*