

Chair Dougherty and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share my support for HB 3390. I am a senior physician at Kaiser Permanente Sunnyside Hospital, an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Community Health at Portland State University, and I also serve on the Board of Advisors of Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility. Since I cannot be at this week's hearing in person, I am submitting this testimony in writing on behalf of myself and Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility.

The flu hit hard and fast this year, and expert advice on how to avoid and manage it was everywhere. One consistent recommendation — a plea, really — was for sick people to stay away from others to prevent contagion. In other words, don't go to work or school sick, because when people don't, contagion decreases and everyone stays healthier.

Yet, 48% of private-sector workers in Oregon don't earn a single day of paid sick time while they work. Nationally, eight in 10 low-wage workers — those least able to afford lost pay — lack paid sick days. This forces too many of our friends and neighbors to make an impossible choice that affects all of us: work sick and spread illness or stay home and lose income, or a job that they can't get by without, and with that possibly their health insurance. Thinking back to the H1N1 epidemic in 2009, the Institute for Women's Policy Research calculated that nearly eight million Americans went to work while infected that year, spreading the virus to another seven million of their co-workers. Seven million people who couldn't stay healthy because contagious co-workers — who should have been home — infected them.

That kind of contagion — and associated productivity losses and costs to Oregon's Medicaid program and other insurers — can be greatly reduced when people stay home from work and school, as public health officials recommend. But they often don't because without access to paid sick days many employees fear losing pay or even their job. Lack of paid sick days is a barrier to good personal and public health, and it's one that we can and should remove.

Furthermore, health care costs are higher when people delay care, skip preventive care, and rely on more expensive off-hours services. Research shows that workers with paid sick days are less likely to delay medical care for themselves or for family members. And we all know that delaying needed care only costs more – and makes people less healthy. Access to paid sick days is also associated with lower usage of hospital emergency departments, a finding that holds true for those workers and families with private health insurance, those with public health insurance (like Medicaid or SCHIP), and those with no health insurance.[i]

I am very pleased that the state of Oregon is seriously considering a solution to this significant community health problem, and I urge you to quickly ensure that all workers in Oregon earn a reasonable amount of paid sick time. The whole state will benefit and our health care system will cost less when we all earn paid sick days while we work.

Sincerely,

Martin Donohoe, MD, FACP

[i] IWPR, Paid Sick Days and Health: Cost Savings from Reduced Emergency Department Visits, November, 2011.