



INCOME SECURITY ADVOCACY CENTRE

1500 – 55 University Avenue  
Toronto, ON M5J 2H7  
Tel: 416-597-5820  
Fax: 416-597-5821  
Toll-free: 1-866-245-4072

**BY EMAIL:** [CWR.SpecialAdvisors@ontario.ca](mailto:CWR.SpecialAdvisors@ontario.ca)

August 31, 2016

Changing Workplaces Review, ELCPB  
400 University Ave., 12<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Toronto, Ontario M7A 1T7

To Whom It May Concern:

**RE: Personal Emergency Leave:  
Response to options presented in Changing Workplaces Review  
Interim Report**

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I am writing on behalf of the Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC). Thank you for the opportunity to comment on options for personal emergency leave (PEL). We support the submissions made by the Workers Action Centre on this issue and are writing to add our own perspective for your consideration.

We would like to raise at the outset the overall concern that stakeholder feedback on PEL is being provided in advance of and in isolation from the final recommendations. The Changing Workplace Review is engaged in a complex process which requires the balancing of the critical needs of workers in precarious employment against the business community's desire for flexibility. Job protections in times of illness, personal or family crisis is an integral part of this process and is linked to the other issues being considered in this Review. Business interests should not pre-empt the full consideration of how PEL provisions inter-act with other minimum standards in Ontario's workplaces.

With respect to the options presented for public comment in the Interim Report, ISAC endorses Option 2 - the removal of the exemption for companies that regularly employ less than 50 employees. Over 1.7 million employees work in small businesses which are exempt from providing PEL: these workers are more likely to be precariously employed and are most in need of this protection.

ISAC does not support any of the other options.

### **Background on the Income Security Advocacy Centre**

The Income Security Advocacy Centre (ISAC) is a community legal clinic located in Toronto and funded by Legal Aid Ontario. Established in 2001, we have a provincial mandate to advance the systemic interests and rights of low-income Ontarians with respect to income security programs and employment through test-case litigation, policy advocacy, and community organizing.

ISAC works closely with Ontario's 60 geographically-based community legal clinics, which assist low-income Ontarians in their local areas to resolve the problems they encounter with accessing benefit programs and services in their daily lives. We also work with community and advocacy groups and organizations across Ontario and Canada on provincial and national issues.

Since inception, ISAC has advocated for improvements to the income security of all low-income people in Ontario through reform of benefit programs and systems, rate increases in income security programs, the adoption and implementation of provincial poverty reduction strategies, and improvements in the labour market.

Personal emergency leave provisions protect low income employees from losing their jobs in times of personal or family crisis, and are of great importance to the communities that we work with.



## The importance of Personal Emergency Leaves

Since 2001, the *Employment Standards Act* (ESA) has entitled workers to take up to 10 days of unpaid Personal Emergency Leave (PEL) per year. This leave can be used by a worker for their own personal illness, injury, and medical emergency or for the death, illness, injury, medical emergency or urgent matter concerning the worker's family.<sup>1</sup> While PEL is an *unpaid* leave, which limits access to it, PEL does provide workers with some of the flexibility necessary to manage work, family illness and emergencies.

Workers in precarious employment, particularly women, need flexible leave arrangements to manage paid work and unpaid caregiving work.

Employers want to restrict the flexibility that workers have to respond to emergencies or to replace this flexibility in leaves with company-based leave policies. For example, employers have called for restricting how many of the 10 days can be used for personal vs. family emergency, or how many can be used for illness vs. bereavement, and so forth.

We believe it is important to maintain the employee flexibility in emergency leave provisions and, further, to expand this leave to *all* employees by removing the current exemption for firms that employ fewer than 50 employees.

## Comment on the Options Presented in the Interim Report

The government asked the Changing Workplaces Review Advisors to make recommendations in advance of the final recommendations emerging from the

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<sup>1</sup> spouse; parent, step-parent or foster child of the employee or their spouse; grandparent; brother or sister, spouse of the employee's child; and a relative of the employee who is dependent on the employee for care or assistance.

Changing Workplaces Review. This is because the government committed in the 2016 Budget to “seek advice ... from the Special Advisors on the Changing Workplaces Review to resolve concerns raised by business regarding the application of the emergency leave provisions” of the ESA.<sup>2</sup>

However, we believe it is important to view PEL in relation to other issues under consideration in the Changing Workplaces Review; in particular, paid sick days.

The Interim Report presents four options for public comment on PEL. We address each of those options below.

**1. Maintain the status quo, that is, no changes to the Personal Emergency Leave.**

The status quo is not an option. Your terms of reference specifically include the objective of improving security and opportunity for those made vulnerable by the changing labour market. As we elaborate below with respect to options two and three, it is women at the bottom end of the labour market who are most adversely affected by a lack of a PEL.

We reject this option as it leaves the exemption for small and medium businesses unaddressed.

**2. Remove the exemption for companies that regularly employ fewer than 50 employees**

We endorse this option.

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Sousa, Minister of Finance **Jobs for Today and Tomorrow** 2016 Ontario Budget: Budget papers. [http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/budget/ontariobudgets/2016/papers\\_all.pdf](http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/en/budget/ontariobudgets/2016/papers_all.pdf)



The majority of workers in Ontario do not have access to paid sick days or employer-based sick leave policies. Many workers rely on the job-protected, unpaid personal emergency leave as the only way to take care of themselves or dependents when sick without jeopardizing their employment when illness, injury or family emergencies arise.

Unfortunately, over 1.7 million Ontario workers<sup>3</sup> do not have this job-protected leave. Only 5% of businesses employ 50 or more workers; 95% employ 49 or less and are therefore exempted from providing job-protected emergency leave to their employees. As a result, one in every three Ontario workers is denied basic job protection in the event of a family or personal emergency. We believe job-protected emergency leave is a necessary standard to support work-life balance that all workers should have access to.

The firm-size exemption denies access to those who need it most. Research done for the Changing Workplaces Review concluded that workers in small workplaces are more likely to be in precarious work (e.g., less likely to be unionized; more likely to be earning lower hourly wages and living in low-income families; and, more likely to be in temporary and part-time work).<sup>4</sup>

Losing pay is enough of a deterrent for workers facing a family or personal emergency. Denying job protection adds even more insecurity to vulnerable workers. Without job-protected leave, many people in exempted workplaces will be forced to work while sick or facing family emergencies. Being able to take time off when sick speeds up recovery, deters further illness, and reduces health care costs. Most people without job protected PEL work in retail, accommodation and food services, construction, health care, and

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<sup>3</sup> In 2015, 1,723,576 people worked in firms with 49 or fewer employees. **Source:** Statistics Canada, CANSIM, table [281-0042](#).

<sup>4</sup> Leah Vosko, Andrea Noack and Mark Thomas (2016) "How Far Does the Employment Standards Act 2000 Extend, and What are the Gaps in Coverage? An Empirical Analysis of Archival and Statistical Data." <https://cirhr.library.utoronto.ca/sites/cirhr.library.utoronto.ca/files/research-projects/Vosko%20Noack%20Thomas-5-%20ESA%20Exemptions.pdf> p 61

social services. The sectors where workers are most in contact with the public are the sectors with the least access to job protected sick leave (PEL).

Ontario is the only province to exempt employers from providing such leaves by firm size. Removing this exemption will bring Ontario in line with other jurisdictions.

**3. Remove the general 10-day leave entitlement and replace it with a number of separate leave categories (personal illness/injury, bereavement, dependent illness/injury etc.)**

Option 3 would break down the 10-day leave into separate leave categories but *not* increase the total leave entitlement (i.e., separate number of days for personal illness/injury, bereavement, dependent illness/injury or emergency leave).

We reject this option.

The Interim Report states that employers want to limit the scope and nature of PEL so that workers cannot access both company-based leaves (e.g., paid sick leave) and unpaid leave under the terms of Personal Emergency Leave. We believe that the social and individual cost of removing flexibility under PEL far exceeds the costs of this unpaid leave to some employers.

The reasons for workers using personal emergency leaves are changing. As more women enter the labour force, the need has grown for the critical ability to access leave in order to take care of dependents. The use of leaves for personal illness has shrunk (from 84% in 1976 to 54% in 2015). An aging population and social policies that rely on family to provide elder care are some of the factors in the shift to using emergency leave for personal/family responsibilities. In 2015, men took 26% of their leave for personal/family responsibilities while women took 56% of their leave for personal/family responsibilities (i.e., not personal illness). Removing flexibility under PEL would create a



substantial burden on women workers. More, rather than less, flexibility is required in PEL to accommodate labour market, demographic and social policy changes.<sup>5</sup>

Some large companies want to be able to opt out of the ESA PEL provisions because they provide one or more benefits that they believe may be more generous than PEL even if the benefits do not cover all the specific provisions of PEL (i.e., do not cover the same family members or reasons for taking unpaid emergency leave). As the Advisors note, “An employer cannot rely on a greater benefit with respect to one standard to offset a lesser benefit with respect to another.” One of the fundamental principles of the ESA is to provide statutory minimum terms and conditions of employment. We strongly believe PEL should not be reduced in scope nor should amendments enable employers to contract out of PEL or other employment standards.

#### **4. Combine options 2 and 3 giving different entitlements for different sized employers.**

Option 4 would break down the 10 day PEL standard into separate leave categories and maintain or create different obligations for different sized employers. We reject this option for reasons discussed above.

## **Conclusion**

We are concerned that the provincial government prioritized PEL issues for an early review, separate from the many other issues that were raised in the Interim Report. The drive for an earlier deadline appears to be geared towards satisfying employer demands. In our view, it is difficult to separate concerns about PEL from the many other

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<sup>5</sup> For data and a fuller analysis of these issues, please see “Personal Emergency Leave: A Response to Options Identified in the Mid-Term Report of Changing Workplaces” by Researchers from Closing the employment Standards Enforcement Gap: Improving Protections for People in Precarious Jobs, August 26, 2016.

ways in which Ontario's employment standards regime fails to protect the well-being of vulnerable workers.

Ensuring universal access to personal emergency leave is one small but important step towards improving the lives of vulnerable workers in Ontario.

Yours truly,  
**INCOME SECURITY ADVOCACY CENTRE**



Mary Marrone  
Director of Advocacy and Legal Services

cc. The Honourable Brad Duguid, Minister of Economic Development and Growth,  
([bduguid.mpp@liberal.ola.org](mailto:bduguid.mpp@liberal.ola.org))