



At-A-Glance: The Pandemic, Public Health, and a Path Ahead

Women, COVID, and the Workforce: The Health Connection

Close your eyes and imagine you are getting ready to head to work as a grocery store cashier to help keep the store functioning for society's needs. You head downstairs to get your children ready for daycare, but you get a call from the daycare center informing you that they are closed due to the COVID-19 outbreak. You cannot find anyone to watch your children...what do you do? It seems like the only real option left is for you to call off of work, stay home, and take care of your children, despite the risk of getting fired. Dilemmas like this in today's environment are some people's every day realities but have existed well before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic have helped to magnify the inequalities faced by women in the workforce throughout history. In Delaware, 77% of Black mothers, 53% of White mothers, 44% of Latina mothers, and 37% of Asian mothers are breadwinner mothers, so women's wages support households (Shaw et al., 2020). Women have had to depend immensely on childcare centers to actively participate in the workforce, and provide for their families (Boesch & Phadke, 2021; Frye, 2020). When the pandemic arrived, many childcare centers and schools closed down, leaving women without access to needed child care services. Women who had to work on the frontlines, particularly women of color, therefore, faced hard decisions (Boesch & Phadke, 2021; Frye, 2020). Women were confronted with the reality that they could have a higher risk of being exposed to COVID-19 due to their proximity to infected people, environments, and their essential jobs that required much person-to-person contact (Frye, 2020). As the schools and childcare centers closed, this left more children needing care and mothers burdened with the decision to either go to work or care for their children, knowing that either decision could immensely impact their family and their health. In addition to childcare stressors, many women also faced concerns due to the very nature of their jobs during the pandemic. Many jobs in Delaware that are classified as essential are filled by women and they include grocery clerks, child-care workers, hospital medical workers, healthcare providers, etc (Delaware Office of Women's Advancement and Advocacy, 2021). These women, when impacted by the burdens of the pandemic, have faced additional consequences such as reduced hours at work or losing their jobs altogether. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more women than men are reported as, "worrying about losing income due to job loss or reduced hours because of COVID-19" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020, If You Are Having Financial Problems, para 2). Even if they can maintain employment, women are confronted with the fact that many of their essential jobs do not offer paid sick leave should they get exposed to or contract COVID (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Lack of access to paid sick days also disproportionately impacts Latinx and Black workers by increasing their risk of illness (Kumar et al., 2012). Individuals without paid sick days are 1.5 times more likely to report going to work with a contagious illness as compared to those with paid sick days (Smith & Kim, 2010).

Paid leave, either family or sick-related is beneficial because, "paid leave means people – especially women – aren't forced to leave the labor force to care for their families or health reducing turnover for employers of all sizes and boosting the economy" (National Partnership for Women & Families, 2020, para. 5). The rate of COVID-19 cases has been consistently higher for Delaware women throughout the pandemic (Delaware Office of Women's Advancement and Advocacy, 2021). This policy implementation is instrumental in helping to improve the health of women because, "Nearly one in four workers has reported either losing a job or being threatened

with job loss for needing to take a sick day” (Kashen & Taylor, 2020, para. 10). This data shows that women are facing impossible choices and are getting sick. Paid leave policies not only help women protect themselves and their families, but protect the broader community by mitigating the spread of illnesses such as the virus, and promoting health for all.

Not only do women make up much of the service jobs in the workforce that can increase their exposure to COVID and impact their health in numerous ways, but these jobs are often low-wage, further compounding health risks associated with poverty as a social determinant of health (Bateman & Ross, 2020). According to Bateman and Ross (2020), “before COVID-19, nearly half of all working women—46% or 28 million—worked in jobs paying low wages, with median earnings of only \$10.93 per hour” (Bateman & Ross, 2020, Women are disproportionately represented in low-wage jobs, para 1). In fact, Delaware’s minimum wage is \$9.25, over a dollar short of that amount. The onset of the pandemic showed that women were losing these jobs because they make up the majority of low-wage workers and these were the type of jobs dwindling due to the pandemic (Boesch & Phadke, 2021). With this, the pandemic assisted in further unveiling the society in which we live, having women make up the most of low-wage jobs, while also facing implications of a wage gap that differs in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. For every one dollar White men make, Delaware Hispanic women make \$0.59, Black women make \$0.68, and White women make \$0.84 (United States Census Bureau, 2021, Median Earnings in the Past 12 Months by Sex Table, 2019). These jobs and wage gaps contribute to the existing gender and racial gaps that persist in society and have negative implications on the health of women, especially among Black and Latinx families (Boesch & Phadke, 2021).

Income is a key factor that influences the health outcomes of families, individuals, and communities (American Public Health Association, 2016). According to the American Public Health Association (2016), “finances are strongly linked to a person’s ability to access healthy food and other resources, creating a link between poverty and a series of chronic diseases including obesity and diabetes” (American Public Health Association, 2016, Improving Health by Increasing the Minimum Wage, para 3). Women must allocate limited funds towards cheaper, unhealthy food and other essential items for their families to survive, therefore impacting their nutritional statuses, as well as adding unnecessary stress that can be prevented (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Further, job loss from the pandemic also translated into loss of access to health insurance and other employment benefits for many women impacting their nutritional statuses, as well as adding unnecessary stress that can be prevented (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Inequitable outcomes in women’s health are not limited to access or one dimension of health such as physical health but impact mental health too (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The 2020 KFF Women’s Health Survey was conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and had a sample of 3,661 women ages 18-64 years old (Ranji et al., 2021). The survey found that over half the mothers in the study with school-age children said that stress and worry of the pandemic has affected their mental health and one in five of those mothers characterized their stress as “major” (Ranji et al., 2021). As of late 2020, almost one million American mothers left the workforce, around a quarter of children experienced food insecurity, and more than three-quarters of parents claimed that the uncertainty of the school year caused them stress (Lerer & Medina, 2021).

The pandemic has shown the importance that women and mothers play within our society, and how they have not received the resources and tools necessary to support their critical role in the workforce, such as equal pay, paid family leave, and universal childcare (Lerer & Medina, 2021). This underscores the importance of putting forth equitable, health-promoting policies that can support women in the short and long term. Applying a Health in All Policies (HiAP) approach for the state of Delaware is one decision-making tool that would help policymakers from multiple sectors in Delaware and beyond continue to explore and identify policy levers that can not only aim to restore our economy but improve our health and achieve equity (Rattay et al., 2020). For example, increasing the minimum wage would improve health outcomes as it would increase financial access to resources necessary to fulfill health in all areas, such as safe and affordable housing, healthy foods, and safe neighborhood conditions (American Public Health Association, 2016). Another policy that would help improve the health of women (2021). In addition, policy

decisions focused on implementing paid family and medical leave, as well as paid sick days, can improve women's health and public health (Raymond, 2021; Glynn, 2015). The workforce challenges brought on by the pandemic and the underlying systemic conditions further amplified by COVID-19 are not just moral and economic issues, but important matters of public health and equity. Women's participation in the workforce is a health issue. Gender equity is a health issue. The gender and racial wage gap is a health issue. We must keep this in mind and be able to integrate and articulate health considerations into policymaking across sectors to fix these issues for not just the short-term as the pandemic subsides, but for the long-term. Essentially, Delawareans will all be better off if we prioritize policies that remove obstacles to health and well-being for all people and communities.

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Delaware SHIP Stakeholder Spotlight: *Office of Women's Advancement and Advocacy*

The Office of Women's Advancement and Advocacy was launched in September of 2017 to promote the equality and equity of women in all areas of society. The Office of Women's Advancement and Advocacy looks after the state of Delaware's women's right work, as well as leads the ongoing implementation of women's rights legislation, evaluating current women's rights legislation, building support for new legislation, and advising the Governor's Office, the Legislature and the Secretary of the Department of Human Resources. In addition, the office reviews and reports on the status of women in the state as well as provides information on the status of women to the public, state agencies, the General Assembly, the Judiciary, organizations, businesses, and industries. The Office of Women's Advancement and Advocacy also oversees the Delaware Commission for Women, Delaware Women's Hall of Fame Committee, and the Delaware Women's Workforce Council.

The Office is directed by Melanie Ross Levin, who shared in a recent interview for this SHIP spotlight that her passion for women and girl's rights led her to policy advocacy work in D.C. and Delaware. Currently, she and her staff of three draft legislation, conduct research, and help work bills in the Delaware State Legislature, as her Office works to ensure that women's and girls' voices are heard and are represented. Ms. Levin explained that she has always been fascinated with women's rights and always felt like she was able to pass more bills and more effectively address issues in Delaware than in D.C., which is why she moved back home to Delaware. Ms. Levin indicated that she advocates for women and girls wherever she goes, as she feels that policies aren't often centered on their needs, and it is important to re-align the focus to make sure women and girls are considered and heard within all aspects of life and policies.

In terms of the impact that COVID has had on Delaware women in the workforce, Ms. Levin shared that COVID has pulled women in many directions from being let go from jobs, having to work on the frontlines in the midst of the pandemic, and caring for children home from school or childcare throughout it all. She shared that women have faced the burden of childcare while also going to work, while sometimes having no one to watch their children, which impedes them from going to work and therefore impacts their income. Some women have even had to reduce their hours at work as they managed these or other obstacles such as serving as caregivers for their loved ones. Ms. Levin also highlighted that there have been food insecurities and loss of housing for families as a result of the pandemic laying people off. In addition, Ms. Levin expressed that when women are sick with COVID-19 or any illness, and faced with the decision to stay home and not make money, or to go to work sick to make money, they're going to go to work to provide for their families. The reality is that many of those who work low wage jobs must work multiple jobs to support their families, requiring them to report to one job after another, thereby potentially increasing their and others' exposure to COVID. Additionally, Ms. Levin shared that women have been more susceptible to COVID-19 in their role as frontline workers, and have subsequently contracted the virus more so than men within the state of Delaware. This data has been reported in one of the latest reports from the Office of Women's Advancement and Advocacy, *"Sounding the Alarm: The Impact of COVID-19 on Delaware Women."*

While continuing to expand upon the topic of the implications of COVID-19 on Delaware women, Ms. Levin communicated that it is important to not only consider women in general but to examine the intersection of race and ethnicity with gender. For example, Ms. Levin highlighted how the racial and gender wage gap was a pronounced inequity with health impacts for Black and Latina women. She also expressed that many people advocate for families and individuals to have emergency funds for situations like the pandemic, but that this is not a feasible solution for many women, and particularly Black and Latina women, who have been impacted long-term by a persistent racial and gender wage gap. COVID-19 has shone a light on these issues that women face economically and have been enduring well before the pandemic.

When contemplating policies to help Delaware women and children recover from the pandemic, Ms. Levin expressed the need for paid childcare, quality childcare, an increase in the minimum wage, and more access to paid sick leave and family medical leave. She also reiterated that childcare needs to be sufficiently funded to be able to stay open to support women going back to work and being able to remain at work.

Delaware SHIP Stakeholder Spotlight: *Delaware Cares Coalition for Paid Leave*

The Delaware Cares Coalition for Paid Leave was recently spearheaded by Liz Richards. The Delaware Cares Coalition for Paid Leave is a coalition of organizations, businesses, networks, health, faith, and community leaders committed to passing a universal paid family and medical leave law in the 2021 Delaware General Assembly. According to the coalition, a statewide paid family and medical leave insurance program would provide 12 weeks of paid leave for a covered purpose in 12 months and can be used to address a worker's serious health condition, care for a family member with a serious health condition, bond with a new child (including newborn, foster, and adopted children), to address the impact of a family member's military deployment, and to handle legal, medical, and practical matters relating to domestic violence. Since the onset of the coalition, over 50 organizations have joined such as the Central Delaware NAACP Branch, Delaware Nurses Association, Metropolitan Wilmington Urban League Young Professionals, etc.

The Executive Director of the Delaware Cares Coalition for Paid Leave, Liz Richards, shared how her journey to establish this coalition consisted of working in campaigns and advocacy for the last 10 years. During this time, she organized a successful effort in Maryland to pass a law guaranteeing paid sick days for all workers. She was also born and raised in Delaware and has experience working with communities that don't have any access to paid leave at their work. Ms. Richards saw that there was a need to pass paid family medical leave in Delaware now more than ever because the pandemic has shown how vulnerable we can become when faced with major medical events or emergencies. The Delaware Cares Coalition for Paid Leave is working to ensure that these life events don't mean that people have to lose their paychecks or lose their jobs entirely. Ms. Richards noted that this is especially important to keep people employed so the system does not work against them, and so they are not devastated by rising health care costs they may incur. She also expressed that paid family and medical leave has been shown in other states to be the most affordable way to alleviate that burden on families.

Ms. Richards shared that interactions she has had with Delawareans impacted by not having statewide paid family and medical leave have revealed that, if you are afraid or unable to take any economic leave, it prevents you from getting the health care you need. She has spoken to people who have had to use gift cards from their baby showers to pay their utility bills or rent after taking unpaid leave following childbirth, and also to mothers who went back to work two weeks after giving birth because they had no other way to pay their bills. Ms. Richards emphasized that it doesn't have to be that way, and that this is hurting Delaware families. She also highlighted Delaware's racial inequities in maternal and infant health, suggesting that Black mothers could benefit from more time to recover from childbirth and to bond with their babies while not dealing with the stress of how to pay bills during this time. The economic health components of paid family and medical leave are closely linked, and to expand access to health care, we have to make sure that people have support to get the health care they need.



“We've needed [paid and family leave] for a long time, but the pandemic has made it more clear than ever that we cannot continue the way we have been going. What we're doing is not working for people, women are leaving the workforce, families are stressed, and this is something that can be part of the solution. That's why [Delaware Cares Coalition for Paid Leave] thinks it's more urgent than ever to pass this bill and help our families.”
- Liz Richards, Delaware Cares Coalition for Paid Leave

Ms. Richards stated paid leave would also provide long-term economic benefits, as studies have shown that people who do have paid family and medical leave, especially mothers, are more likely to go back to work after they take such leave. She highlighted that not having access to paid and family leave is harmful to working women and bad for our economy, impacting everyone, which is why studies and data from business owners across the political spectrum indicate that paid family medical leave is helpful for businesses and their workers.