

MAKING NC WORKER FRIENDLY

Boosting wages and improving leave policies for NC workers

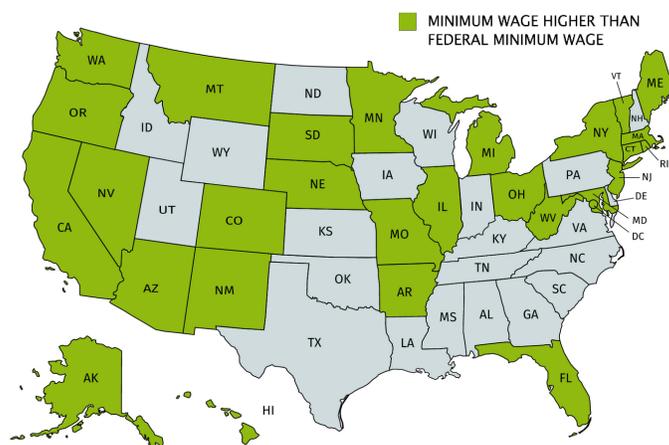
By Samone Oates-Bullock

North Carolina's labor force is comprised of more than six million employees in various professions, fields, and specializations. These employees are, of course, one of the most valuable assets of the businesses in which they work and play a critical role in shaping today's economy. Having happy and healthy employees is beneficial not only to the employees themselves but to society as a whole. There is, therefore, a great need for policies that ensure safe work environments, living wages, and a robust safety net for employees.

BASIC WORKER PROTECTIONS: WHERE NC COMES UP SHORT

● North Carolina lags behind the nation in terms of wages.

The current minimum wage in North Carolina is **\$7.25**. This means that a full-time minimum-wage employee working 40 hours per week, 52 weeks a year would earn **\$15,080** a year. That puts employees slightly above the federal poverty level of **\$12,060** for an individual, and below the poverty level of **\$24,600** for a family of four. Low wages leave workers unable to meet their basic needs and cause an array of other economic problems that reverberate through the economy including lost sales, fewer customers, smaller profits and increased employee turnover.



● Paid sick days enable employees to prioritize their health.

Currently, there is no North Carolina law that requires private employers to grant their employees any paid or unpaid sick days. When employers do not provide paid sick days, it forces employees to choose between work and health, often resulting in delayed medical care, the spread of illness within the workplace and general public and further risk of complications. By providing paid sick days, employers promote job stability, productivity, decreased injuries, employee retention and improved public health. Additionally, employees allowed to stay home while sick are likely to recover faster and seek appropriate medical treatment before their illness worsens.¹

More than 1.5 million private-sector workers in North Carolina are not entitled to any earned paid sick leave.

● Medical leave allows employees to adequately care for themselves and their families.

The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), is a 25-year-old federal law that guarantees job-protected, unpaid leave for up to **12 weeks** to recover from severe illness, care for a newborn or newly adopted child, or to care for a seriously ill child, parent or spouse. Employees are eligible for leave if they have worked for their employer at least 12 months, at least **1,250 hours** over the past 12 months, and work at a location where the company employs 50 or more employees within 75 miles. Having this protection is crucial for employees because everyone requires care at some point in their life. Unfortunately, while some employees take unpaid leave through the FMLA, a larger number of employees go without leave either because they are ineligible for FMLA or because they are eligible but cannot afford to take unpaid leave.²

POLICY PRESCRIPTIONS

- **Provide sick days for employees through The Healthy Families & Workplaces/Paid Sick Days Act (HB 544/SB 556).**

The [Healthy Families & Workplaces/Paid Sick Days Act](#) (HB 544 and SB 556) would allow employees to earn one hour of paid sick leave for every 30 hours worked—earning up to four days’ leave for small business employees and up to seven days for employees of medium and larger businesses. Providing paid sick days is beneficial to employees, businesses and the economy as a whole because it recognizes that sickness is inevitable. Employees should not have to choose between their job and their health. Instead, they should be empowered to be the healthiest version of themselves.

- **Create a livable wage for North Carolina’s employees.**

North Carolina should gradually raise the minimum wage to \$15 over five years. Raising the minimum wage would provide a number of benefits to employees, employers, and the economy, including thousands of new jobs, increased consumer spending, and a boost in profits and tax revenues.

- **Expand family and medical leave through the Caregiver Relief Act (HB 543/SB 463)**

The [Caregiver Relief Act](#) (HB 543/SB 463) would expand eligibility for FMLA-protected, unpaid family and medical leave to include care of siblings, grandparents, grandchildren, stepparents, and parents-in-law. Expanding family and medical leave would allow employees to deal with a larger variety of life events such as a family health crisis or pregnancy, without fearing job loss.

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1. <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/wpallimport/files/iwpr-export/publications/B338-NC.pdf>
 2. <https://www.dol.gov/whd/fmla/cover-statement.pdf>

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