The new paid family leave

From grandparent leave to paw-ternity, some companies are offering paid time off to care for relatives, train a pet or get acquainted with new grandchildren.

Text by Jena McGregor and illustrations by Hannah Li
December 30, 2019

The U.S. remains the only industrialized country that doesn’t guarantee workers paid family leave. In 2018, just 17 percent of civilian workers could get paid time off from work to care for a new child or ill family member, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That figure dips to 11 percent for workers at the smallest companies.

But a tightening labor market and a vast cohort of millennial workers beginning to start families are putting pressure on employers to expand their benefits to attract and retain workers. Eight states, plus the District, have also passed laws that require workers or their employer to pay into state paid leave funds through payroll contributions. And President Trump has signed a bill that, for the first time, will provide paid leave for the federal government’s estimated 2.1 million civilian employees following the birth, adoption or fostering of a child.

Large employers are offering more weeks of paid leave to employees trying to meet family obligations, such as caring for an elderly parent or sick older child, coping with the death of a family member, or in some instances taking care of a new pet.

“We’re seeing an increasing trend in interest in covering things that plague families beyond parental leave,” said Carol Sladek, who leads work-life consulting for the human resources consulting firm Aon. “It’s definitely bubbling up from employees: ‘But what about me? I’ve already raised my kid. I’m in my 50s, and my 85-year-old mom is sick.’”

Here are some stories, edited for length and clarity, of how some workers are using these broader definitions of paid leave:
My mother died in the fall of 2017. She lived with cancer for about five years, but the last couple of months were probably the most trying. I have two pretty small children — at that time they were 8 years old — and it was very hard for me.

I was taking an awful lot of paid time off and working from home as much as I could. I had the best support from my leaders and colleagues. But what was present was a lot of guilt. If I was at an appointment with her, I was always skimming email. There wasn’t this approved, defined leave that I was on.

Then in February of this year, we found out my father had very aggressive mesothelioma. When his decline started, it was rapid. He didn’t feel good and nothing sounded good to eat. You prepare [food] and you carefully put it in front of them, and they will not eat any of it. There are all the side effects: Trouble-shooting constipation with your dad while sitting outside the bathroom door. That is the day of a caregiver. And then there’s the worrying. I just couldn’t sleep well.

There was a Saturday where he said: “I don’t know what else you can do for me.” He was basically asking to embark on hospice. I thought to myself: I’m going to have to deploy that four weeks [of leave].

The first week he was in hospice, he was on these medicines that you can really only get there. He was able to walk pretty well with a walker, and he had pretty good energy. There was this one day where he felt good — like surprisingly good — and I pulled my boys out of their summer care program and brought them over to play a board game. We could do something happy with him. If I hadn’t had the leave, and I heard that my dad was feeling good, I would have thought "Dad feels good today, maybe my brother will go down and watch a baseball game with him.” But with the leave, I felt able to go there and just be there with Dad.

To give somebody the permission to not have guilt about how they’re juggling work with the really trying job of caregiving — it’s indescribable. I don’t think anybody can know what it’s like until you go through it.

—Jackie Christie, project manager, Best Buy, Richfield, Minn. Company offers paid family caregiving leave of up to four weeks.
Georgia was the first Coppel girl to be born into my family since the late 1950s. So it’s pretty special. She’s two now, and she’s taught me how to play with dolls and have tea parties. I always tell her she’s my princess. I’m very, very close to her — when she sees me, she’ll get very excited.

It was great to be able to take extra leave just to bond with her. I didn’t take three straight days, but just took the time here or there. You have to take the three days within the child’s first year of life.

It was a new benefit, and I hadn’t talked to anybody who had done it. It was great to have the flexibility just to be able to throw in a few extra days.

Twice I provided day care for the day. The first couple of days it was just me, proudly walking around the neighborhood with a baby carriage. I had to make sure I stuck by her schedule. Another time we went to a petting zoo.

With my grandson, I had to take paid [vacation], and I gladly did that. But it was nice not having to do that the second time around. [Having a named paid leave for grandparents] codifies the opportunity. It’s structured. It’s very apparent that this is what the company wants you to do.

That absolutely makes a big difference. It’s there in black and white — there’s no doubt about whether my manager is going to support that. It takes an element of stress off your shoulders. There’s not going to be any ramifications.

My grandkids call me “Pop Pop.” When my grandson started talking and started calling me “Pop Pop” I recorded it and downloaded it into my phone as a ringtone. Anyone in my family who called, my phone would go “Pop Pop!” I’d be in a meeting with a bunch of people, and they’re all smiling and laughing. Now it’s very typical [for people in the office] to say, “Hey Pop Pop.”

I proudly own that. It kind of sets a tone. I hope it helps others be comfortable that [taking time off for your family] is the right thing to do.

—Steve Coppel, systems engineering manager, Cisco, Owings Mills, Md. Company offers three paid days off for new grandparents.
We are a blended family. When my husband’s daughter Maddie came back from summer camp in 2017, she was feeling a lot of tingling in her digits. She had previously been diagnosed with something called POTS, or Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome. She had had hundreds — literally hundreds — of tests below her neck to get to that diagnosis. Her pediatrician said [the finger tingling] sounds neurological, and the only thing left to do is a brain scan. And with that scan we saw she had a brain tumor.

She had surgery, followed by 33 treatments of proton radiation. In March, she had another MRI and we saw very quickly that the tumor grew back. The doctors said, “This is a very mean tumor, a very determined tumor.” She was immediately scheduled for a second surgery. She went through five cycles of different kinds of chemo combinations, none of which worked. In November 2018 she went on a last ditch effort, an immunotherapy drug.

We had been managing as a family well enough. But on Jan. 19 we received a panicked phone call from Alexandra, Maddie’s mom, that she was in the middle of having a major seizure. That ended up being the trigger for my taking leave.

Maddie became paralyzed on the right side. She had to be intubated in the ambulance, and then was taken from New Jersey down to Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia in a horrific snowstorm. It became very clear to us we were really receiving therapy to have her condition not deteriorate any further. My leave started on Jan. 21 and Maddie passed away on March 3, 2019.

While I was on leave, I was sort of the family unit manager: What’s the schedule today? Who needs to be where? What medicines need to be taken? We had to make a lot of modifications to Maddy’s room and bed, so I went to the lumber yard to get wood slats to put across the bottom of her bed. I went to the medical supply store to get compression socks. I got bowls and utensils that she could use to eat.

I truly believe that Alexandra and Tom knew that these were the last weeks, days and hours with Maddie. I was the go person, because I wanted to give them the time that they wanted and needed to be with their daughter.

I took 12 weeks off. We have eight weeks paid through the caregiver leave and there was an allowance for an additional four weeks that was unpaid [by BMS].

But I took some additional time just to grieve. There was still so much to do after Maddie passed. [Without the leave], I don’t even know how we would have handled it.

—Jodi Hutchison-Sanford, communications leader, manufacturing; Bristol-Myers Squibb, New Brunswick, N.J. Company offers eight weeks of paid caregiver leave, with the option of an additional four weeks unpaid.
I’m the chairman for the union at Revere Copper. Not only have I used New York’s Paid Family Leave program, but I’ve helped numerous members sign up for it. Most of my guys are using it for the birth of a child. It’s made a huge difference — they never would have done that [before the state program]. They would have taken a day or two for the delivery and then, right back to work.

I have a diabetic daughter. It was Thanksgiving Day, 2013 when we found out. She didn’t eat much, she didn’t feel good. The next day she looked very pale, unresponsive — I looked at my wife said “we’ve got to go. There’s something wrong.” Once we got her to the hospital in Syracuse, they actually had to put her in a medical induced coma to slowly bring her back. We were by the bedside 24 hours a day for nine days. We weren’t leaving.

When we got done with that, we had some answering to do. My wife didn’t get a paycheck. I didn’t get a paycheck. It was a wicked impact on our family. Christmas was right around the corner, there was fuel oil — it’s an expensive time of year. We had to plan on tax rebates coming in the next year to get caught up on a few of the bills we had to let go.

[The state paid leave] program has been a lifechanger. I’ve used probably 12 days of it. My daughter has had, at bare minimum, one appointment every three months. If she has a morning appointment, by the time I get to Syracuse, get done with the appointment and get her back to school, the workday’s almost over.

Or I might get a phone call saying "Dad, I’m not feeling good.” She’s 14 years old, and the responsibility factor hasn’t quite hit with them yet at that age. It’s not like a normal person getting sick. Someone has to be there with her and make her test her sugar every hour on the hour. There can be huge fluctuations. You’re not going to trust someone who’s not educated on what [diabetes] is and how to adapt to the changes.

The state benefit is about 55 percent of my pay, so really you’re only getting a half day of pay, but still, it helps with that sting. My daughter has always felt guilty that because of her illness, she was taking away from the family. Her insulin cost money. Her appointments cost money. She’s even made the statement that “it’s nice we don’t have to worry about you getting paid today.” It’s also a comfort for her.

—Brian Wiggins, shop chairman, Revere Copper Products, Rome, N.Y. The state’s paid family leave program is funded by the employee only, and provides up to 60 percent of the state’s average weekly wage.
I was at work one morning and received a group text message about one of my great-nieces who needed to be placed within a home. There was a domestic situation between the parents, and the child, then a 5-month-old baby, could have possibly gone into foster care with the state. The mother did not feel like she was equipped to be able to take care of the child, and she requested someone take temporary custody.

I didn’t know how I was going to manage it — I am a single mother and also have a 5-year-old — but I stepped up to take care of her.

I notified my manager, and he said, “You may want to contact H.R. — you may be eligible to take family leave.” I left and went to the family’s house about 10:00 in the morning, and by 12:00 I had social services coming out, inspecting my home to make sure it was a safe place for the child. By noon I had a 5-month-old.

That first day, I had to get a lot of items because she didn’t really have much of anything other than a car seat, a couple bottles and a half a pack of diapers. So my first stop was to Walmart. Within a couple of days, I submitted that documentation, and my leave was approved for the full 16 weeks. It was a very easy, simple stress-free process.

The paid leave, number one, enabled me to stay up with an infant at night. I had gotten past that phase with my daughter — getting up in the middle of night and comforting her and feeding her and rocking her back to sleep. Young children still understand the trauma of being away from their parents, no matter how small they are. It took a lot of time to cuddle her and make her comfortable in my home. Sometimes she would be a little fussy and a little aggravated, and it took time for her to bond with me and become more comfortable with me. I was able to be home with her and not have to worry about or stress about having child care.

My daughter was such a big helper — but being a single mother, then bringing another child into the home, the time off was much needed to bond with my child and a foster child.

—Kimberly DaCosta, financial services consultant, TIAA, Charlotte, N.C. Company offers 16 weeks paid leave for foster parents.
This is my first time being a dog owner. I was very nervous — I think my girlfriend and I waited over a year on the breeder’s wait list.

Everyone says getting a puppy is a lot of work, but that doesn’t really capture how much work it is. The first night was actually okay because the puppy was really tired. The second night was a nightmare. We made a bunch of rookie mistakes: We kept the crate too big, so he pooped in the crate. We were told to let him bark it out, but that was a terrible idea because he was literally laying in his own poop. He started barking about 2 a.m. and at 4:30 a.m. we took him out, gave him a bath and cleaned out his crate. I have a photo of my girlfriend sitting next to the crate literally reading him a bedtime story.

My girlfriend took the first week off, and then he went to “puppy school” each day for just under a month. I then took one week of “pet-ternity” leave and one week I worked from home.

By then he was crate-trained and knew basic commands, but he was still a puppy. He was still super excited — everything was new to him. We were taught that he should be socialized with as many types of people as possible, and with as many different types of environments as possible. What does the mall look like? What does the park look like? What does the car look like? What does the bus look like? Getting into an elevator was super scary for him the first time. So I literally tried to find as many environments and people for him to meet during that time as possible.

Reddit has a generous vacation policy — it’s unlimited PTO. So practically speaking, there isn’t a huge difference between taking vacation leave and taking time off for a new pet. But unlimited PTO is also at a manager’s discretion, and you have to be performing your job to expectations.

[With the new pet leave], the company is carving the time out for you. It’s a nice gesture from the company that says we recognize you have a new pet and we think you may want to do this.

—Yuhao Ding, senior engineering manager, Reddit, San Francisco, Calif. Company offers one week paid time off and one week flexible work schedules after pet adoption.
It was sort of a gradual progression at first — my mom was less mobile than she had been. She began losing weight. We thought it was Lyme Disease at the time, but she was much sicker than we realized.

She had had a previous bout of breast cancer when I was in high school, but it had been so long that it just didn’t jump immediately to our minds that maybe it had come back.

I was traveling for work and got a call from my dad and it was confirmed that she had cancer. It had spread to her bones, to her lymph nodes, to her brain and skull.

I got support from my project to take some time off. I wasn’t sure if I might want work to distract me to some degree, but I knew I wanted to spend all my time and energy on my family. My dad had been taking care of her near full time for a couple of months, and I knew he needed my help. My sister moved back as well, but she had just come off maternity leave and was working full time and had her hands full with a 4-month-old.

I started out mainly helping with preparing food and helping her go to the bathroom. My dad and I would have to clean her and change her; later on it would include things like rolling her over and making sure she didn’t get bedsores. But just as important was having conversations with her, recounting memories, bringing some small moments of happiness.

My fiance Brittany and I had been dating for five years. We realized we both really wanted to make sure she could participate in our wedding. So we approached my mom with the idea of having a small intimate ceremony in the house. We flew in Brittany’s immediate family, we had my sisters and my dad there. We got married in the hallway to my mom’s bedroom. She loved it.

Her funeral was at the end of March. I decided to take some extra weeks for bereavement. I began transcribing my mom’s journals into digital copies so I could go back and read through and get a better understanding of who she was, earlier in my life.

When my wife and I have kids, the ability to stay home on leave will be huge. But I would say that taking care of a sick family member can sometimes be just as important. The fact that [Deloitte] doesn’t discriminate between the types of leave — that they provide some level of freedom for the employee to determine whether they need more time to focus on family — it’s a huge benefit.

—Brendan Ricci, senior consultant, Deloitte, Arlington, Va. Company offers 16 weeks paid leave for the addition of a child, or to care for an ill family member.