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A way to support family values

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BY CHARLES WOWKANECH

New Jersey was fortunate to have a contested presidential primary this year. Our state's placement on the new Super Tuesday schedule allowed the electorate to hear a lot more from the candidates than we have in the past. In particular, I was happy to hear several candidates, both Democrats and Republicans, talk about "pro-family" issues. For example, Barack Obama has an entire platform based on "strengthening families," and Mike Huckabee has "family" displayed at the center of his campaign motto.

However, at the end of the day, New Jersey voters want to see these slogans converted into concrete policy proposals and adopted. Mottos must translate into and embrace the needs of working families. Although we must wait until after November to see if this becomes reality at the federal level, at the state level, legislators can show that they support pro-family policies. The most pro-family and pro-values policy to be debated by our Legislature in decades is paid family leave insurance legislation.

While family values topped the list of priorities for all 120 legislators in last November's election, this bill had strong opposition at a recent committee hearing at which all Republicans and one Democrat voted against it. Unfortunately, these opponents seem to be caving in to the pressures of corporate lobbyists, whom are repeating the Chicken Little "the sky is falling" mantra they have used over and over against other valuable public policies such as Social Security and the minimum wage.

Once again, they are boldly predicting (although they have not presented any data or evidence to support this) that business in the state will collapse if the bill is passed. Contrary to this unjustified rhetoric are data from the U.S. Labor Department. That study showed that 90 percent of employers offering leave to employees under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act felt the benefit had a neutral or positive effect on their bottom line.

A recent poll conducted by Rutgers University showed that 78 percent of respondents (knowing they would need to pay approximately \$33 a year for the program) favored extending the unpaid leave law to provide six weeks of paid leave to care for a newborn baby or a seriously ill family member.

Elected officials should meet the needs of their constituents, who overwhelmingly support this program -- close to eight out of 10 residents are asking for this type of social insurance program.

The bill has undergone several revisions. Included was a reduction from 12 weeks of leave to six. Also, the bill has strong protections against abuse, and small businesses (those with 50 employees or fewer) would not be required to hire back an employee who chooses to take the benefit. This is consistent with the federal program.

Finally, it is important to note that the rest of the industrialized world has had paid family leave in place for decades. A February 2007 Harvard University study showed that the United States is one of only five of 173 nations surveyed that do not have a paid maternity leave program. The other four are Lesotho, Liberia, Swaziland and Papua New Guinea.

It's hard to understand how legislators who espouse family values can vote against paid family leave.

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