PAID SICK DAYS

How Grocers and Retailers Can Curb the Spread of Illness and Promote Public Health

Local officials and public health advocates have brought paid sick days to the forefront of the public health debate in Washington over the last few years. Because private businesses employ most people and also decide whether workers can take time off for illness, the public relies on them to adopt responsible policies that limit the spread of illness. Employers in food industries, such as grocery and supercenter retail, play a particularly important role. Grocery workers are on the front lines of food safety. Their ability to protect their customers from illness depends on whether they are able to stay home when they are sick. And yet, evidence shows that far too few grocery employers offer paid sick leave to their employees.

In a recent survey of grocery store and supercenter workers in King County, Puget Sound Sage found that a large proportion of grocery workers in King County go to work sick. Most cited inadequate paid time off as a reason.¹

Analysis of the survey results found that:

- 42% of grocery store and supercenter workers surveyed have gone to work sick in the past year.
- Two out of three (66%) said that they did so because they did not have paid sick days, had used all of their paid time off already, and/or had wanted to save their paid time off.
- Other worker surveys have shown similar results, such as food system workers who went to work sick (53%), and grocery deli workers who went to work sick in the past year (51%).²

Have you gone to work sick in the last year?

- 42% Yes
- 58% No

Why Do People Go To Work Sick?

Given the wages and income for front-line workers, it is not surprising that, in the absence of adequate paid sick days, workers often choose to come to work sick, rather than losing much-needed income. Whether or not workers have union representation appears to play an important role.

- Non-union workers in this survey earned a median wage of $11.00, and an average of $11.76. Comparable union members in King County earn a median of $15.00, and an average of $15.06.¹⁴

- 45% of workers in non-unionized stores reported going to work sick in the last year, whereas 31% of workers in union stores reported going to work while sick.

Workers also need access to healthcare when they are sick – union grocery members who work at least 15 hours per week qualify for quality healthcare, including preventive care.
WHY ARE GROCERY AND RETAIL WORKERS IMPORTANT TO PUBLIC HEALTH?

In addition to the common colds and flus that are passed along when an ill cashier touches every item that goes into a customer’s grocery bag, serious illnesses are spread as a result of people working while sick.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently found that sick food workers cause over half of norovirus outbreaks, and contributed to another 29% of outbreaks.³
- During the H1N1 Pandemic in 2009, sick workers may have caused as many as 7 million co-workers to get sick.⁴
- In 2011, 16% of documented foodborne illnesses in Washington were caused by ill food workers.⁵

LACK OF PAID SICK LEAVE CAN HARM CHILD HEALTH

No caregiver should be forced to choose between caring for a sick child and going to work so they can pay the bills. However, without adequate paid sick leave, many families must decide between caring for a sick child at home and losing needed pay or risking their jobs.⁶

- One in five workers in our survey (20%) live with at least one child and do not have any other adults in their households.
- In Washington, the majority of preschoolers and school-age children live in homes where all parents are employed.⁷

Adequate paid sick days mean fewer children going to school sick. When parents can stay at home with their kids, recovery times are shorter and germs stay home too—ensuring healthier schools, families and communities.⁸

FEWER WORK SICK IN SEATTLE WHERE PAID SICK LEAVE IS REQUIRED BY LAW

Sage surveyed grocery and supercenter workers five to six months after the implementation of the Paid Sick and Safe Time Ordinance in Seattle. Although a recent survey of Seattle employers revealed incomplete compliance with the law,⁹ our results indicate that fewer grocery and supercenter employees in Seattle are working while sick.

- One out of three Seattle respondents (33%) had gone to work sick.
- In contrast, 46% of non-Seattle respondents had gone to work sick.

![Chart showing fewer workers in King Co. have gone to work sick in the last year than in Seattle](chart.png)
• One Seattle worker shared: “I went to work sick before the sick leave law passed. Now we can call out the first day and still get paid. Everyone used to come to work sick because they couldn’t afford to lose a day’s pay.”

**PROFITABLE GROCERY GIANTS NOT OFFERING PAID TIME OFF TO WORKERS**

Large grocery chains not only short workers paid sick leave, but any paid time off at all. All workers in the survey were employed by chain stores with more than 10 locations, or by stores with about 100 employees per store and a minimum of 4 locations. These grocers comprise some of the largest retailers in the world, selling and earning billions of dollars each year, and compensating executive officers in the tens of millions of dollars. However, few of their frontline workers in the Seattle area receive adequate paid time off for any purpose.

- Only one in three workers surveyed (33%) received more than five days of paid time off.
- 40% received zero to five days of total paid time off per year: which includes vacation, sick days, holidays, etc.
- One out of four workers (26%) did not know how much paid time off they earn.

Recent developments in the Seattle area illustrate the extent to which some grocery chains consider paid sick time of marginal value for workers and the public. Safeway, Kroger and Albertsons are, as of this publication, bargaining with the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 21, UFCW 367 and Teamsters 38, over wages and benefits for workers in the Puget Sound. These chains have responded to the Seattle paid sick days law by proposing that workers opt out of their rights under the city ordinance as well as waive their rights from any future paid sick leave laws that may pass in Washington State. But unionized grocery workers are bargaining hard to win a fair sick leave plan. And public opinion shows strong support for the concept of paid sick laws; nationwide 86% of voters think it is important that Congress and the president consider such laws at the federal level.
Recommendations:

Adequate paid sick leave can help prevent the spread of disease and ensure that no-one has to choose between being a responsible member of society – as a parent, caretaker or front-line food-handler – and being a good employee. Workers should not have to face threats of lost income or lost jobs by staying home when sick.

As such, local and State legislators and public health officials should continue to explore requirements for businesses - where needed – to provide minimum paid sick days.

But major grocers should not wait for public officials to act. Grocery retailers across the region should voluntarily adopt employee policies that prioritize protecting public health. Specifically, grocery and retail employers should:

• Adopt company policies that offer adequate paid sick days to both full-time and part-time employees.

• Cease bargaining with grocery workers’ unions to forgo their rights to paid sick live granted by city and municipal laws.

• Comply with and support current and future city, county and state standards that guarantee workers access to paid time off when they are sick.
Notes

1 For more information about Puget Sound Sage’s survey of mostly non-union workers in the grocery and supercenter industries in King County, contact the Sage offices at (206) 568.5000, 1032 S. Jackson Street, Suite 203, Seattle, WA 98104. www.pugetsoundsage.org


8 For more information on the effects of inadequate access to paid sick leave, see Marilyn Watkins, 2013, cited above.


10 Stores include: 99 Ranch, Cash and Carry, Costco, Grocery Outlet, Hmart, Safeway, Sam’s Club, Target, Town & Country, Trader Joe’s, Uwajimaya, Walmart, Whole Foods, and Winco.


12 As of August 2013, members of UFCW 21 are currently bargaining a contract with national chains (Safeway, Kroger and Albertsons) that will set standards for the majority of retail food workers in King County.


14 Data provided by UFCW 21, which periodically obtains all wage data for its members. For direct comparability to the survey data, UFCW 21 calculated these numbers and included only union members who are at least 18 years old, work in King County, and had worked at least 3 months. Data is as of August 2013.