

Bernalillo County commissioners hear comments on sick leave plan

BY JESSICA DYER / JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Tuesday, May 14th, 2019 at 9:34pm

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Business organizations are asking the Bernalillo County Commission not to hurry a newly introduced paid sick leave proposal, saying they would like time to study the provisions and discuss the potential implications.

But several other advocacy groups — from the AARP to the New Mexico Coalition Against Domestic Violence — say it's time to act and provide workers with a critical benefit.

Commissioners Maggie Hart Stebbins and Debbie O'Malley on Tuesday introduced legislation that would require businesses with at least two employees to provide workers one hour of paid sick leave for every 30 hours worked up to 56 hours per year.

Employees could use the leave for their own health needs or to care for a family member or someone else to whom they are close. It also provides for absences related to domestic violence.

The law would only affect employers in the unincorporated areas of the county, where there are currently about 1,350 active commercial business licenses. Businesses in their first year would be exempt.

The commissioners did not discuss the bill during Tuesday's meeting, though about 20 people addressed it during public comment.

Several business groups voiced reservations, saying that the bill in some ways resembled one that city of Albuquerque voters narrowly defeated in 2017. Others argued it might invite baseless lawsuits — something David Pena with the New Mexico Association of Commerce and Industry said could disproportionately hurt small businesses without the means to wage a legal battle.

Several asked the commission to wait longer before voting. The board is scheduled to vote June 25.

"I'd encourage you to not rush the vote in 30 days so we do have time to get everyone's concerns on the table," said Larry Sontag, who said he represented the New Mexico Business Coalition.

But more than a dozen people spoke in support of the measure, saying local workers should not have to choose between tending to their health needs or an income, and that not having paid sick leave is a public health hazard.

Greg Frazier, president of the United Commercial and Food Workers Union that represents about 3,800 workers statewide, said many of his members go to their grocery store jobs sick because they do not have traditional sick leave and cannot afford to stay home.

“It’s really tough, because you just don’t want somebody sneezing on your cold cuts or coughing on your muffins,” he said.

A few teachers also spoke, saying they see students come to class ill because they do not have a parent who can stay home with them.

And Gwyn Kaitis of the New Mexico Coalition Against Domestic Violence said the proposal would allow victims the time off needed for medical treatment, counseling, legal proceedings and other related issues.

“Without leave and other supports, it can be too difficult for survivors to manage the many issues at play in their lives,” she said. “Without job security and a paycheck, victims simply cannot afford to leave an abuser.”

In an interview after the meeting, O’Malley said she did not foresee postponing the June 25 vote. She said she would willingly meet with business groups over the next month to hear their positions. But said the initiative was meant to help the county’s most vulnerable workers who could potentially to lose a house or apartment if they became ill and had to miss work without compensation.

According to a recent study commissioned by the Albuquerque City Council, 90% of the city’s private sector employees with household incomes under \$15,000 do not currently have paid sick leave.

“This is in support of the working poor, so they can get some benefits,” O’Malley said. “And let me tell you, it’s not a huge benefit, but it’s something.”