

# Governor signs NM paid sick leave legislation

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BY DAN BOYD / JOURNAL CAPITOL BUREAU CHIEF

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New Mexico will join about 15 other states that mandate businesses provide paid sick leave policies for their employees under legislation signed Thursday by Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham. (Eddie Moore/Journal)

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**SANTA FE – New Mexico will join about 15 other states in requiring businesses to provide paid sick leave for their workers – but not until July of next year – under a measure signed into law Thursday by Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham.**

The sick leave bill, House Bill 20, was one of 10 bills signed by the governor, who faces a Friday deadline to act on most measures passed during the 60-day legislative session that ended last month.

It generated pointed debate at the Roundhouse during the session after a year in which the COVID-19 pandemic took a toll on workers and businesses alike.

Even the governor expressed misgivings about the impact the paid leave bill could have on businesses, but she threw her support behind the legislation after backers agreed to postpone its effective date from this summer to July 2022.

“This is, point blank, a humane policy for workers,” Lujan Grisham said in a Thursday statement after signing the bill. “No one should ever be compelled to come to work when they are sick. And no worker should ever feel they must choose between their health and their livelihood.”

Once it takes effect next year, the new law will be among the nation’s most generous by allowing workers to take up to 64 hours of accrued leave per year.

The union-backed bill will specifically permit employees to use that accumulated leave for illnesses, injuries, family medical appointments and absences due to domestic abuse or sexual assault.

Critics argued it will impose another financial burden on businesses whose sales have plummeted during the pandemic, but supporters described their concerns as overblown at a time when many businesses are getting state and federal financial aid.

Many grocery store employees and other front-line workers testified during the legislative session they sometimes had to pick between going to work while sick during the pandemic, or staying home and risking losing part of their paycheck.

Bellanira Lozano, a Santa Fe single mother who works as a domestic worker and caretaker, said Thursday the pandemic hit her family hard.

“This law means families like mine won’t have to decide between getting paid or going to work sick,” said Lozano, who is a member of Somos Un Pueblo Unido, a nonprofit organization that was among a coalition of groups that advocated for the new law.

Meanwhile, the proposal approved by lawmakers does not exempt small employers, as some other states have done. But it will allow employers that already offer paid leave programs to qualify under the law as long as they meet its minimum terms.

The new law will apply to all parts of New Mexico, including Bernalillo County where a paid sick leave ordinance for unincorporated parts of the county is in place but is not as generous as the law set to take effect next year.

**Aid-in-dying OK’d**

The governor also signed Thursday aid-in-dying legislation that will allow terminally ill New Mexicans to seek medical aid to end their lives.

Previous attempts to pass the bill, officially known as the End-of-Life Options Act, had stalled at the Roundhouse, but this year's version passed both the House and Senate amid emotional debate.

“Every New Mexican deserves to live life as they choose, and to maintain that free will and autonomy when facing their final days with a terminal illness,” said Rep. Debbie Armstrong, D-Albuquerque, who sponsored the bill during this year's session.

However, the legislation was opposed by the state's Roman Catholic bishops, among others, who expressed concerns that it could harm vulnerable individuals.

Once the law takes effect May 18, patients themselves will have to self-administer life-ending medicine. And health care providers will only be allowed to prescribe the medication to a patient after determining the person has a terminal illness and the mental capacity to make the decision.

The new law is named after Elizabeth Whitefield, a retired judge who testified four years ago while battling cancer in favor of similar legislation. She died roughly a year-and-a-half after her testimony.

### **136 bills signed**

With the latest round of bill action, Lujan Grisham has now signed 136 bills passed by lawmakers during the 60-day session and vetoed one bill dealing with fees for water testing.

The remaining 21 bills still awaiting action before Friday's deadline include a \$7.4 billion budget bill for the coming fiscal year and a \$518 million capital outlay package.

The governor has more time to consider bills passed in last week's two-day special session.

Proposals to legalize retail sales of marijuana and expunge cannabis convictions from court records face an April 20 deadline for action by Lujan Grisham.

### **At a glance**

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham signed 10 bills Thursday, including paid sick leave and aid-in-dying proposals. Here's a brief description of some of the other bill approvals:

- House Bill 317: Creates new health care affordability fund financed by higher surtax on insurance companies.
- Senate Bill 8: Allows the state and local governments to set pollution control standards that are stricter than those imposed by the federal government.
- Senate Bill 40: Makes it easier to participate in extended learning and K-5 Plus programs.
- House Bill 234: Provides more oversight of the state's guardianship system, including new subpoena powers for the State Auditor's office to access records.
- House Bill 266: Requires additional training for certain special education teaching licenses.