

Focus Group Protocol: State-Level Paid Family Leave

March 27, 2019

Thank you for joining us! We've asked you to take part in today's focus group about the [Paid Family Leave] program because you are a new mom. We're working with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health to get a better understanding of the effects of [Paid Family Leave], especially around women's health. We thought a good way to learn more about [Paid Family Leave] and women's health is to talk to the women who have used the program and to those who have not. For women who have used the program, we would like to know whether you think the [Paid Family Leave] program affected your physical and mental health, and if so, how. For women who did not use the program, we would like to know whether you think *not* participating in [Paid Family Leave] affected you in terms of your physical and mental health.

Again, the main focus of the conversation will be about [Paid Family Leave] and its effects on your physical and mental health. We will be delving into topics like the leave you've taken, physical complications you may have experienced, activities like sleep and exercise, and changes in your mood and thoughts after having a baby. We recognize that topics like child care arrangements are also important to working moms, but that will not be a main topic of this discussion. As we mentioned when you signed the consent form, some of the topics we're going to discuss today are sensitive, so if you don't feel comfortable, you don't need to answer, and you can leave the focus group at any time.

The opinions and experiences you express today will help inform the national conversation around paid family leave, so thank you for being here! Let's get started! I'm going to start the recorder.

A. Introductions and Leave

1. Let's start by having each of you say your "fake name" – the one on your name tag – and who is part of your household. These could include your children, your partner, or other family members and friends/roommates.
2. Now, let's talk about the length of your maternity leave. How much time did you take off or do you plan to take off if you're still on leave? Or, have you have decided not to go back to work, or you aren't quite sure when you'll go back?

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B. Physical Health

Now, let's discuss your physical health. We'll discuss mental health separately.

Physical Health Status

1. Let's start with your pregnancy. Did you experience any physical complications related to your pregnancy or the birth of your baby that affected your postpartum health?
[Probe: pregnancy related = changes in blood pressure, gestational diabetes, preeclampsia, severe morning sickness, pre-term delivery, work-related, unplanned C-section, pain; other postpartum issues = back pain, bleeding, mastitis, other unanticipated health issues]
2. Do you think [Paid Family Leave] affected your physical recovery from pregnancy and birth? If so, how? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not having it affected your recovery? If so, how?
3. What has your experience been with accessing medical care – either for your routine care or to address your specific physical health issues? Do you think [Paid Family Leave] has affected your ability to get the medical care you need? If so, how? If you didn't use [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in the program affected your ability to get care? How? [Probe: more time to schedule/get to appointments]
4. Do you feel like the amount of time provided by [Paid Family Leave] was sufficient for you to make a full physical recovery? In other words, how long would you say it took you to feel “normal” again after birth? Or, if you are still experiencing health issues, can you remind us how many months postpartum you are?

Health Behaviors

Now, let's talk about some of the behaviors that might affect your physical health – like sleep, exercise, nutrition, and breastfeeding. As I go through these issues, I'd like you to think about how having some paid time off through the [Paid Family Leave] program might have impacted these issues.

1. What types of healthy lifestyle activities or behaviors have helped you to maintain your physical health postpartum, or what has been hard for you to keep up with after having your baby?
2. Do you think [Paid Family Leave] affected your health behaviors after birth? If so, how? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in the program affected your health behaviors? If so, how?

If a given topic has not come up naturally, rephrase question to: “How has [topic] changed since the birth of your baby, and do you think that Paid Family Leave affected [topic]”

- a. Do you think that [Paid Family Leave] affected your ability to sleep and rest? If so, how? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in

the program affected your ability to sleep and rest? If so, how? [*Probe*: more time off of work so you could rest during the day]

- b. Do you think that [Paid Family Leave] affected your ability to maintain exercise or other health behaviors, like eating healthy? If so, how? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in the program affected your ability to exercise and eat well? [*Probe*: more time off of work to prepare healthy meals and exercise]
- c. Do you think [Paid Family Leave] affected your ability to breastfeed or pump, if that was part of your plan? If so, how? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in the program affected your ability to breastfeed or pump? If so, how? [*Probe*: more time at home with baby to "practice," keep milk supply up, develop schedule]

C. Mental Health

Now, I'm going to ask similar questions, but related to mental health. When people think about mental health, they often think about diagnosable mental illness. We are interested in hearing about those experiences, but we also want to know more about how you feel in general, like any difficult thoughts or feelings you've been having. I know it's sometimes hard to talk about these thoughts or feelings, but I want to remind you that we're in a safe space. What you say is confidential, and chances are whatever you're experiencing is being experienced by someone else here.

Mental Health Status

1. Have you experienced any changes in your mood, thinking, or how you do things since giving birth? This could be things like: having more irritability or worried thoughts; feeling nervous, on edge, or panicky; feeling sad or down for an extended period of time; or not wanting to do things that used to be enjoyable.
2. Now, let's talk about how participating in [Paid Family Leave] might affect your mental health. Do you think [Paid Family Leave] affected your mental and emotional recovery from pregnancy and birth? How so? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in the program affected your mental and emotional recovery?

If a given topic has not come up naturally, rephrase question to: "How has [topic] changed since the birth of your baby, and do you think that Paid Family Leave affected [topic]"

- a. Do you think participating in [Paid Family Leave] affected your stress level related to finances? If so, how? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in the program affected your stress level related to finances? How so? [*Probe*: having wage replacement, feeling more secure in your job]

- b. Do you think [Paid Family Leave] affected stress related to being away from your baby or job? If so, how? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in the program affected stress related to being away from your baby or job? If so, how? [*Probe*: less separation anxiety/more time to bond with baby]
 - c. Do you think that [Paid Family Leave] has affected your relationship with your baby's father or another partner? If so, how? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in the program affected your relationship with your partner? [*Probe*: reducing financial stress, more time to set up schedules with work and childcare, safety]
 - d. Men eligible for [Paid Family Leave] include: biological parents, adoptive parents and foster parents. Did your baby's father take [Paid Family Leave]? What about other forms of leave, such as paid time off or employer-sponsored leave? If so, how did that affect your physical and mental recovery?
 - e. What mental health supports did you need/seek? Were you able to get all the support that you needed? Do you think [Paid Family Leave] affected your ability to get the mental health supports you needed? If so, how? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in the program affected your ability to get the mental health supports you needed? If so, how? [*Probe*: more time to schedule/get to appointments]
3. Do you feel like the amount of time provided by [Paid Family Leave] was sufficient for you to make a full emotional and mental recovery? Why or why not? In other words, how long would you say it took you to feel "normal" again after birth? Or, if you are still experiencing mental health issues, can you remind us how many months postpartum you are?

Mental Health Behaviors

Now, let's talk about what you do to feel better and reduce stress. As I go through these issues, I'd like you to think about how having some paid time off through the [Paid Family Leave] program might be related to these issues.

1. What do you do to feel better and relieve stress, like talking to a friend, going to church, going for a walk, or practicing yoga? In other words, how do you deal with stress and other difficult thoughts or feelings? Or, what has been hard about maintaining these behaviors after the birth of your baby?
2. Do you think [Paid Family Leave] affected your ability to take part in the activities that affect your mental health? If so, how? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in the program affected how you relieve stress? If so, how? [*Probe*: more time for yourself, more mental space]

- a. Do you think that [Paid Family Leave] played a role in your ability to engage in wellness activities you might do on your own, like taking a walk, listening to music or practicing yoga? If so, how? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in the program affected your ability to engage in wellness activities? If so, how? [*Probe*: more time off of work so you could engage in wellness activities]
- b. Do you think that [Paid Family Leave] played a role in helping you access social support from family, friends, religious community, or other new moms? If so, how? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in the program affected your ability to access social support? If so, how? [*Probe*: more time off of work to engage in social activities]

D. Ability to Fulfill Roles in Family, Workplace and Community

Finally, I want to talk about how some of the physical and mental health issues we've been discussing may be affecting your ability to fulfill your roles in the workplace, family, and community. I know that having a baby limits your time, which may affect your ability to fulfill these roles. However, I'd like you to think more about how your mental and physical health after having your baby affects these areas.

1. Earlier in the conversation, you mentioned [challenges with physical and mental health]. Have these physical and mental health challenges affected your ability to meet responsibilities you have toward your family, your job, and your community? If so, how? These may be related to your performance at work or social obligations you have to your friends, family or religious community, for example.
2. Do you think that [Paid Family Leave] impacted your ability to fulfill these roles? If so, how? If you didn't take [Paid Family Leave], do you think not participating in the program affected your ability to fulfill these roles? If so, how?

E. Closing

1. Is there anything you would change about [Paid Family Leave] to improve your physical and mental health? [*Probe*: higher wage replacement to reduce financial stress, longer leave to reduce separation anxiety]
2. Is there anything you would like to add that you haven't already raised related to [Paid Family Leave] and your physical or mental health?