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Report TO MEMBERS

Businesses Deliver Powerful Message to Legislators

When it comes to member grassroots lobbying, the business community has always been at a disadvantage. While public employees can take time to participate in union-organized rallies in front of the State House, few business owners can afford to close their doors or leave their businesses for half a day. But the push to enact a paid family leave mandate that would apply to every business, regardless of how small, has galvanized the business community.

Under the paid family leave bill, S-2249 (Sweeney, Buono), employees would receive up to \$502 per week for 12 weeks in temporary disability benefits. Employers could not require employees to use more than two weeks of their paid sick or vacation time first. Unlike the existing state and federal unpaid family leave laws that apply only to companies with 50 or more employees, this paid family leave mandate would apply to hundreds of thousands of small businesses throughout the state. There is no small business exemption!

The threat of making New Jersey only the second state in the nation to enact a paid leave mandate (only California has one now) has many employers eager to fight back.

First, in response to a Membership Alert we distributed in February, NJBIA members sent more than 5,000 messages opposing the paid family leave bill to the Governor's office, Senate President Richard Codey, and members of the Senate Labor Committee. If you have not yet sent your message, just visit www.njbja.org, click on the link in the Membership Alert box, and follow the online instructions. It only takes a minute, so please act now.

Furthermore, on February 5, when the Senate Labor Committee voted on the bill, 45 business people believed it was so important to testify against the bill they took time away from their businesses.

Member lobbying is effective because businesspeople can speak from their own experiences, providing legislators with valuable insights into how things work in the real world of business. Take, for example, Lori Anne Oliwa, a vice president with the New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners (NJAWBO) and owner of Merchant's Choice Card Services of Matawan.

Oliwa noted that being without key employees for as long as three months puts an additional burden on other workers. "Requiring other employees to absorb the extra work only works if there are additional employees to rely on," Oliwa said. "Many of the businesses I represent have only one, two or three employees, and this legislation would devastate their operations, maybe even force some completely out of business."

Joe Teti, president of Triangle Art in Lawrenceville, said the bill would compound New Jersey's reputation as an anti-business state and hurt an already sluggish state economy. "The evidence of economic malaise is all around us, yet we (the state) keep our heads buried in the sand and continue to make the mistakes that got us in this mess."

I understand how easy it is for employers to get discouraged with the legislative process. Despite such strong opposition from businesses, Senate Labor Committee members voted 3 to 1 to release the bill, with Senator Robert Littell providing the lone "no" vote. But the committee is just the first step on a long journey. Because of the strong showing of the business community, the measure was sent to the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee for further study, instead of going directly to the full Senate for a vote.

So keep sending e-mails and letters to your legislators and the Governor. Your voice will be heard. The powerful message that business owners delivered to the committee in February is still echoing through the halls of the State House and, hopefully, will soon land on more sympathetic ears. ❧