

Dr. Tam makes the case for paid sick leave

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Canada's Chief Public Health

Officer makes the case for paid sick leave

In October 2020, Canada's Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam released [an in-depth report](#) analyzing the state of public health in Canada, sharing important information about the impacts of COVID-19 on people across the country. The report, entitled, "From risk to resilience: An equity approach to COVID-19," asserts the importance of incorporating a health equity approach to pandemic preparedness, response, and recovery, recognizing the ways in which existing inequities across society have been exacerbated by the pandemic. As Dr. Tam writes, "No one is protected until everyone is protected."

The release of the report is timely, and coincides with the launch of the HSA Paid Sick Leave Campaign. The campaign is mobilizing members to send letters to Premier John Horgan, the minister of health and the minister of labour, asking that all workers across BC be provided with 10 days of paid sick leave if they contract COVID-19, need to self-isolate, or must take care of a sick family member. In addition, the campaign calls on the government to deliver to all workers a minimum of three paid sick days per year, which would increase to up to ten days per year in accordance with the worker's hours of work accrued.

Additionally, the plan would fund a rebate program for new and existing businesses impacted by the pandemic to cover up to 75 per cent of paid sick leave costs while they get back on their feet.

The recent report released by Dr. Tam makes clear connections between job precarity, reduced workplace protections and risk of exposure to COVID-19. She names access to paid sick leave as an important factor in

protecting worker and community health.

According to the report, only 42 per cent of working Canadians over the age of 18 report to have access to paid sick leave. This could impact the observance of public health guidelines. The report states that:

“Without paid sick leave, employees may lose income if they become ill and are unable to work. Without employment security, they may lose their jobs if they stay home when sick. In either case, and particularly if they are economically insecure, workers may feel unable to comply with public health guidance to stay home when sick.”

The report links the presence of infectious illnesses to such organizational factors as a lack of paid sick leave.

For essential workers who are precariously employed and unable to work from home, the report found that an absence of benefits and economic protections translates into increase risk of exposure. According to the report, “The absence of these protections is challenging at any time, but, during a pandemic, the consequences can be more severe and may increase risk of virus exposure and transmission.” It names a lack of paid sick leave among such factors increasing risk. This reality holds particularly true for low-income workers.

During COVID-19, the absence of paid sick leave in labour legislation can result in life-threatening consequences. But even in the best of times, paid sick leave is important to protect public health and reduce health inequities.

To join HSA’s campaign or send a letter to your elected official, visit www.hsabc.org/paidsickleave.

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