



What's Work Got To Do Paid Parental Leave?

Guest: David Hurtado, Sc.D., Julia Goodman, M.P.H, Ph.D., Dawn Richardson, M.P.H, DrPH

Host: Sam Greenspan, M.P.H.

- Host Sam G.: [00:00](#) Do you think there's a difference at a societal level, or an organizational level, for companies and countries that have implemented Family and Medical Leave policies for decades now, compared to countries beginning to implement them, like the United States, and countries that may be behind us?
- [00:13](#) Well there aren't really any countries that are further behind the U.S. in this area.
- [00:20](#) It's springtime, and you know what that means, babies. Sorry if that was too personal, but no pressure. It's kind of a personal episode. Today, we want to consider have you ever had time off as a new parent? Or to care for an older family member? Did your workplace have a Family or Medical Leave Policy that allows you to take time off to care for a child or a family member? Did you use all of your time, or have to use sick leave? Was their policy for new mothers and fathers?
- [00:48](#) Or maybe you've just had to pick up the slack for co-workers, taking advantage of this policy. How'd that make you feel, and why is this an issue right now?
- [00:56](#) To dig into these issues and concerns, we'll be talking Dr. David Hurtado, Dr. Julia Goodman, and Dr. Dawn Richardson about their recent evaluation of a Parental Leave Policy that was recently implemented for all Multnomah County employees. Dr. David Hurtado is a Research Scientist at Oregon Health and Science University, Oregon Institute of Occupational Sciences, and the Oregon Healthy Workforce Center, a Total Worker Health Center of Excellence. He has publications on a variety of health and productivity determinance, such as organizational policy, social networks, and peer support. He received his Doctorate of Science and Masters of Public Health from Harvard University.



[01:32](#) Dr. Julia Goodman is an Assistant Professor in the OHSU/PSU School of Public Health, who does research at the intersection of health services research, population health, and work-family policies. Her research explores how social, structural and economic matters influence perinatal health, and explores the impact of work-related policies on fertility, diseases, and pregnancy outcomes.

[01:54](#) Dr. Dawn Richardson is an Assistant Professor in the OHSU/PSU School of Public Health. She's a Social Epidemiologist whose research examines the role of structural racism in creating adverse geographies of opportunity and driving health inequities via chronic stress. Her work is influenced by community based participatory research principles, and she engages with communities to advance health equity through intervention and policy change efforts. Her current research focuses on maternal health, and includes a project examining the role of documentation status on immigrant women's health; an evaluation of paid family leave policies on health; and the impact of racism and discrimination on Latino chronic stress.

Host Sam G.: [02:34](#) Here in Oregon, multiple bills including HB3031, the Family Equity Act, would provide a period of paid family and medical leave for all employees in Oregon. If the paid family leave law were to pass in Oregon, and may look similar to laws passed in neighboring states, like California and Washington, where it applies to organizations with 50 or more employees. Washington's paid family and medical leave law allows workers to take 12 weeks off, with pay, when they welcome a child, or when a family member's illness strikes. In extreme cases, that benefit could even be stretched to 16 or 18 weeks.

Host Sam G.: [03:12](#) Six states currently have paid family medical leave laws, with another 20 considering similar programs. Even federally, Congress has introduced legislation known as the FAMILY Act, that would allow employees 2/3 of their wages, up to a cap, for a limited period of time. Up to 60 work days, or 12 work weeks in a year. This proposal has received bipartisan support.

Host Sam G.: [03:33](#) This begs a question, why has family and medical leave become such a prominent issue?



[03:37](#) I think this has become such a big issue because we are realizing that caregiving is something that affects everybody, at some time in their lives.

[03:46](#) This is something that we refer to as the "sandwich generation," that there are increasingly people who are both caring for older parents, as well as young kids. This is just something that reaches so many people in the population right now.

[04:00](#) I would like to add that organizations are also trying to come up with their own family medical leave policies to recruit and retain talent, which is great for the skilled workers, that are more likely to be employed in such forward-thinking organizations. It's also important not to leave behind less fortunate workers, for whom family medical leave is going to become a very important financial mechanism in times of stress.

[04:24](#) I would just say I think terms of a public health perspective? It's just become such a large issue in the wake of things like the Affordable Care Act, for example. Just the increasing recognition that the further upstream we go in terms of prevention, the less costs we'll incur downstream in treating populations.

[04:43](#) There's been a substantial literature built, demonstrating health outcomes related to access to family and medical leave. I think that literature growing has increased recognition of the need for preventative efforts, to enhance population health together have helped move us as a society towards adoption of these types of policies.

[05:03](#) The state policy that's being proposed, the Family Equity Act, here in Oregon? Would cover all kinds of family members for family caregiving, it's not only parental leave. That's something that is really important I think to those who are actively advocating for that particular bill.

Host Sam G.:

[05:19](#) It sounds like a family and medical leave policy could be a competitive advantage for organizations, and it could also benefit workers who may be responsible for taking care of new children and their parents. Lastly, it could lead to a more cost-effective healthcare system.



- Host Sam G.: [05:31](#) In place right now federally, we have the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1999, which already protects jobs for workers for 12 weeks without pay. So why are we now making this distinction between sick time, and vacation time, and family leave time? That's a lot of time.
- : [05:46](#) Well I think one thing that's really important about the Family and Medical Leave Act, as you pointed out, is that it provides leave without pay. We've seen from the literature and now, you know, over the last 25 years, when you provide leave without pay? That means a lot of people can't take advantage of it. A lot of people are just not taking that leave, even if they have job protection, because they can't afford to forego pay for 12 weeks.
- [06:09](#) So there is the possibility for those who work for companies that provide them with sick and vacation time, that they can take that leave, but that's usually not enough. That also means that they don't have that leave available when they need it for other kinds of illness.
- [06:24](#) We've seen in our study that we've just completed that there are a lot of folks who will use their sick time to care for a new baby. The first couple of weeks or months after having a baby? That means that they don't have any leave available for the rest of the year. As anybody who has had a small child knows, you have a lot of need for sick leave when you have a little baby. Even after that first period for bonding, so that's one issue.
- [06:49](#) I think there's also a lot of people who are left out of those policies. There are a lot of people who don't accrue sick and vacation time. As I said, people who have only unpaid leave are just not able to take advantage of it.
- [06:59](#) One thing I want to just piggyback on what Julia said is, even those people often who do have access to sick and vacation time accrual, in jobs that are more stressful and more onerous. They've already dipped into those banks so much for their own health. When pregnancy comes around, and child birth and so forth, they've already ... That stuff isn't even available to them, because they're at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum, or the lower end of the job spectrum. They're already at the disadvantage, even if they do have access.



- Host Sam G.: [07:34](#) Okay, so even folks who are lucky enough to accrue these benefits. Once they max them out, there's nothing left that they can do.
- [07:40](#) Absolutely. Also, I would just make a distinction. I mean this is something I think for myself, I'm newer to thinking about family medical leave as a public health intervention. For me, I have two small children. When I had my first four years ago, I wasn't even really clear on what the 1993 act was, as opposed what the newer family medical leave policies will be. I didn't realize, it's just job protection, it's not really a benefit in the way that we think of them.
- [08:06](#) The policies being proposed here in Oregon and Colorado and so forth in the U.S., these aren't ... They're progressive for our nation? But they're not progressive in a global context. I mean we are the only nation among our peers, that don't offer these types of policies. I don't want to negate the progressiveness of this work, I think it is that. And, it will really just put us on the same playing field as other countries have been. In recognizing the importance of families, in terms of their health, in terms of their life chances, in terms of their contributions to the economy, and so forth.
- [08:43](#) These are policies that should be in place to demonstrate the values that we have, and right now there's a misalignment there. Hopefully these policies will work to correct that, as they become adopted.
- [08:56](#) The U.S. is the only country, except for Papua New Guinea, that does not have any kind of mandated paid parental leave policy.
- Host Sam G.: [09:04](#) Wow.
- [09:05](#) It's not only among our peer countries, it's among all countries. That is really shocking and embarrassing.
- [09:12](#) Good perspective.
- [09:13](#) I think a lot of the research that is out there that looked at the effect on labor market outcomes, on health outcomes, comes from outside the U.S. because there's a longer history of these kinds of policies. I think there are the same, a lot of the same



organizational challenges exist outside the U.S. though too. I mean all of these countries that have these sorts of policies, there are issues with employees having to talk to their employers about I'm going to be out on leave for this amount of time. Whether it's a couple weeks in the U.S. in some cases, or a year-and-a-half in other countries where they have much more generous policies? There's still a lot of stigma around leave taking. But I think we can learn a lot from countries that have more experience with this, and figuring out how to normalize it.

[09:56](#)

Yeah, I mean, family care in coordination is such a daily stressor. It pops up and effects the economy at large. There's not going to be a case, that's what I'm trying to say, for these kinds of policies to ... If you take into account all the direct costs? In absenteeism, in low productivity, in health care claims and utilization of services, these policies make sense. I mean it's not up to working families to deal with this, we need a stronger safety net.

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I imagine as researchers investigating impact of this new parental leave policy at Multnomah County, it can be difficult to determine who is taking a specific type of leave, whether it's sick time, disability time, vacation time, for its intended purpose.

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In some cases, that's mandated by the employer, they have a certain order that you need to exhaust your paid time, before you run out of paid time. You need to use this kind of leave before that kind of leave. And other cases, it's just people trying to figure it out, and they're just pulling from different sources. There are some places where you might have private short-term disability insurance, if you had enough foresight to anticipate a pregnancy the next year and then buy into that. So using that in a certain order.

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Usually if that's pregnancy disability insurance, that means you can only use it for the first six to eight weeks after a baby is born. That's only for birth mothers, so that means any other parents are not able to take advantage of that benefit.

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And it's not 100% of your pay either, right?



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Yeah, it's usually 60% or so of your pay. So that can be a challenge for some people. We found this a lot with our study at Multnomah County, that people are really confused about how to mix these different policies and benefits together. Not only employees, but also people in HR are confused about how these overlap. What's covering your job protection, what's covering pay? How much pay? Are you still accruing benefits while you're on leave? All these sorts of things, when we have so many different policies, as opposed to just a single paid family medical leave policy?

[11:53](#)

I think another challenge with the Family Medical Leave Act, that you brought up in the last question is, that it doesn't cover all workers. Only about 50% of workers are actually covered by that, the Family Medical Leave Act, because it only covers employers of a certain size? So you have to have at least 50 employees within a 25-mile radius. It only covers full-time workers. You have to have been working for the employer for a year. There are a lot of restrictions that mean it's just a lot of workers aren't covered. And, disproportionately, people who are at the time in their lives where they might likely to have a child? Are disproportionately not covered by the Family Medical Leave Act, because they work for smaller employers, or they haven't been working enough hours in that period.

[12:34](#)

So that's one big problem that we're trying to address. Both with organizational policies and also with other state level policies that would provide pay, but also sort of reduce a threshold to get access to these policies.

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It's been interesting to hear about the work you three have done evaluating roll-out of Multnomah County's Parental Leave Policy, which designates time off for fathers as well. So why was it important to include fathers in this coverage?

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Well as a new father, I can tell you why it's important. I think there are too many factors that come to mind. The first one is gender roles are changing, and fathers need to be more involved in child care. By providing a policy that allows new fathers to do that, then role changing can be accomplished more quickly.



[13:19](#)

The second part is there's plenty of evidence that shows that an unintended effect of paid leave policies is discrimination against women, against mothers. Studies from developing and undeveloped nations showed that in countries where there's an expansion of maternal leave policy? Employers tend to hire fewer women in the reproductive age, because they are concerned that they are not going to show up for work, or they could be out of the job in a few months.

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That concern that employers have, which leads to employment discrimination to women, can be reduced if these policies are gender neutral. If fathers are expected, if not mandated, to a state leave. That's an example of expansion, where both parents, the birth and the number of parents, need to decide the period in which they're going to incur the policy. That's a great mechanism to ensure that both parents have the time to spend with a new child. But also to just make it gender neutral so that there's no potential discrimination against women.

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You know I think there's stigma around taking leave, around different people taking leave. There's certainly, for a lot of fathers outside the U.S. as well as in the U.S..

Host Sam G.:

[14:31](#)

It sounds like the Parental Leave Policy has direct benefits for men to spend time with their new child, as well as the benefit of making the workplace more equitable. Are there other benefits that organizations gain from effectively implementing similar policies?

[14:44](#)

Yeah, I think the recruiting and retaining talent is one point we see. I think that what we learned from our study, as well as other literature is that employers that offer this policy? Spark a sense of gratitude among their employees. But there's a caveat there though, that at least here in the U.S., that gratitude sometimes is conflated with lesser skilled? Because this policy needs to be expanded, especially in this gender neutral expansion. Yes, employees feel grateful that they can take some time off, which is paid. At the same time, they're either unconsciously or sometimes purposely, are made to feel guilty by their employer, or by their co-workers. So, implementing this type of policies, whether it's parental leave policy or family and medical leave policy, has to be in a way where employees feel



that this is a job benefit not a favor that an organization is making them.

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I just want to add to that, thinking Julia, of the very first conversation we had with the folks at the City of Portland. We ended up doing our research with Multnomah County, initially it was going to be with City of Portland, which has a very similar, almost identical policy. One of the things, and I think the impetus for bringing us in? Was they were very concerned about the aging workforce, and their ability to, as David was saying, recruit and retain workers, but also to diversify their workforce? It was a big theme of the conversation.

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Then that conversation included, when we went with the county. I think their findings internally, that offering these types of policies bring in exactly the type of workers that they're looking for. Women, people of color, just a more diverse workforce.

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In the focus groups we ran with Multnomah County, I mean we found consistent, almost word-for-word what David was just saying. People were grateful. I don't know that anyone's used the word "pride," but I think what they were describing was a feeling of pride, that they worked for an employer who had made such a, for them, very progressive move. That made them feel like they were part of something bigger.

[16:46](#)

The level of commitment people expressed in Multnomah County is pretty huge. Specifically because of the policies. In fact, the men in the focus groups were really, some of them, the most vocal people around this. About how they'd been given different offers at different places, and those places didn't offer such policy. One man said, "I'll never leave the county, because of this." He was able to be there for the pregnancy and then the birth of his child, and so on. We heard a lot of feedback like that.

Host Sam G.:

[17:11](#)

It sounds like the policy also attracts a more diverse workforce. Particularly younger workers who are more likely to become new parents. I'm curious if there's any resentment between workers who are picking up the slack for others workers who are utilizing the policy.



[17:25](#)

I think that's a really great question. I mentioned earlier, the focus groups we did were not just with parents or leave takers? We had an equal number of focus groups with county employees who were not leave takers, had really no intention of being so? That's almost verbatim, I think we asked about specifically about resentment. It was just not something that rose to the top for them.

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However, there was a really strong message among all the focus groups, around what it means to be a family-friendly workplace? And that that goes beyond just having these types of policies. Also really pushing back on what family means, and who it means we're supporting. For those who don't have children, but they have an aging parent, or they have siblings, or other family members that need care, they were saying they'd really love to see these policies be applied to them. It's not that they resent the other people that are accessing them, but that they see this potentially as a good sign that we're moving in a strong direction both for Multnomah County, and Oregon more broadly.

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There's a reason why a lot of organizations have focused just on parental leave? That is because it's short of more manageable to predict who is likely to take leave and how big the costs are going to be. But as Dawn just said, there's clearly a need that goes far beyond new parents. What most of the ... At this point, all of the state policies, including in Oregon, where we're proposing a state paid family and medical leave policy, it would cover all family caregivers, and time to care for your own illness.

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This is something that I think is really important both because we've seen that there's a need, for not only new parents to take leave, but also all kinds of family members taking care of aging parents, siblings, and also needing to take time to care for your own illness. I think it's really important because it reaches a broader set of the population. There's more people who are able to access this important benefit. It also means that there's going to be a little less resentment, and less pushback on this kind of policy, because you're bringing everybody to the table and saying look, this is something that affects all of us.

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This is something at some point in your working career, you're going to need to take time. It helps to address some of these



things mentioned earlier, around hiring discrimination as well. If you're not only covering new mothers, but also fathers and also other kinds of family members. You can't just pick out who is likely to take leave and target them.

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Not even just parents, like most people feel satisfaction to working at an organization that offers this policy if you're going to use it, I think. As a principle, people support and people feel this is the right thing to do. So there is almost a moral case, above and beyond the potential users. Here in the U.S., in absence of a federal policy, I think it's what we're thinking progressive employers who also need to initiate some of these changes that hopefully one day will be extended to the whole nation.

Host Sam G.:

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All right, and even once they have the policy, they need to understand if it's being implemented properly, you know? Are people using it? Are there any other outcomes from Multnomah County that you'd like to share?

[20:22](#)

We did see changes, basically as we anticipated in patterns of leave-taking. The policy was six weeks of fully paid parental leave. What we saw was that fathers increased their leave-taking significantly. This is back to about what we've seen in the literature, that fathers are more likely to take leave when it's fully paid. Offering this period of six weeks of fully paid leave meant that fathers were taking about six weeks more leave.

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Debbie talked earlier about some of the countries that have mandated periods, that only the fathers can take. So you can't just transfer that to mothers and saying we're going to add up our total leave is going to be longer and the father's not going to take it? They say no, if the father doesn't use this amount of time, you just lose it, you forfeit it as a family. That's something that has been shown to be effective, because you know you're leaving money on the table if you don't take advantage of that paid leave.

[21:20](#)

That's been a really important way that some societies that are further along in this process have figured out how to get fathers involved. And you know, hopefully, and I don't know how much literature there is out there yet in this area. But hopefully that



will lead to less discrimination against women who are taking leave.

[21:36](#)

For mothers, the effect was a little bit different. Mothers were sort of taking as much leave as they could, regardless, before the policy? This meant taking some period of paid leave, if they had vacation and sick leave, like we were talking about earlier. Then taking an extended period of unpaid leave. What the policy did for women was transfer a lot of the unpaid leave to paid time.

[21:58](#)

For them the benefit, I mean certainly was they did increase their overall leave-taking a little bit, and I think that's a benefit. But in a lot of ways the benefit was really in not having as much unpaid time, so it was a financial benefit for the families. But that was really just scratching the surface. Implementation is the key word. Beyond that, we saw that there were a lot of differences in terms of the experience that workers had.

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In our study, we did a survey? Looked at the administrative data, get at some of those patterns of sick leave versus vacation time versus the paid leave. Sort of seeing how that's happening for people. Then we also collected qualitative data, from people doing focus groups. In the focus groups, we were really able to get more of that implementation story? What we found is that depending on your positionality within Multnomah County, women, people of color, lower wage workers, they took the same amount of leave. They took the six weeks. But their feelings about returning to work? Their feelings about their time during leave, expressions of guilt, in some cases a little bit of anger and resentment over the navigation. Less support from supervisors. Less support from co-workers. Those types of things.

[23:12](#)

I think it's really important to say, you know we've been talking about Multnomah County, I think all of us agree that were we to do these focus groups anywhere, we would have seen the exact same thing.

Host Sam G.:

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Well sure, it's a brand-new policy and it's a policy that can be optimized now.



[23:24](#)

Absolutely. And the county's incredibly progressive and doing great work. What we see here is adoption of the policy is not a panacea. As soon as we adopt it we have to be thinking very intentionally about implementation and how to address what we know are going to be inequities that are going to occur.

Host Sam G.:

[23:41](#)

Right, there's a wide variety of workers at Multnomah County, across the health department. There's going to be differences based on gender, race, and the level that you are in the organization. I'm wondering if you could share with us if there were any differences based on the type of work that folks were doing?

[24:00](#)

Yeah, I think what we found at the county is pretty consistent with what is covered in the literature of work-family arrangements. There is this notion of facility stigma, that depending on the job, is easier, or not to take time off or have different arrangements like flexible schedules or working from home, things like that. Depending on the job type, then it's easier to, both for employers and employees, to make arrangements around the parental leave period. Because we applied multiple methods? We were more positioned to detect some differences that a single method alone wouldn't do.

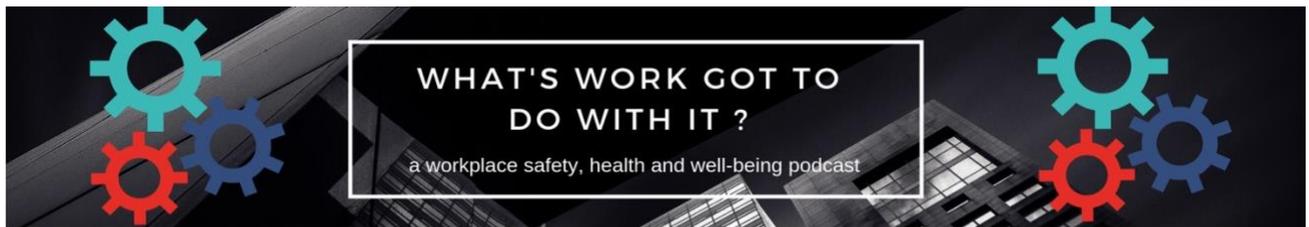
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The survey, we didn't find much variation across departments. Thanks to the focus groups, we learned how difficult it is for workers who job is face time, or that they have to be in very specific locations at a specific time. That's the kind of job that is very difficult to work around when you need to take leave or when you need to have different arrangements, because you're dealing with a work-life issue. That is very consistent with the flexibility literature out there. I don't think it's very unique of Multnomah County, but that's the challenge for implementing these kinds of arrangements, that it's easier for specific types of jobs. It's much harder for jobs that require face time.

Host Sam G.:

[25:18](#)

It sounds like organizations who want to implement these kinds of policies, they really need to be cognizant of what type of workforce that they have, and how the policy might look different based on the type of work that their workers are doing.



[25:30](#) Right, the people who work in some of these occupations are also at the low end of the socioeconomic spectrum, so it's a double challenge there.

Host Sam G.:

[25:39](#) All right, so just to wrap things up. Is there any additional advice or recommendations you have for organizations who are interested in implementing family and medical leave policies? Are there resources available online for employees who would like to learn more?

[25:52](#) Good questions, exactly why we wanted to do this research. There's not like a www.gohereforguidance, because that hasn't been created yet. But we feel that our research is helping to fill some of that gap. From our findings specifically, the big key recommendation would be around supervisor trainings? And supervisor support.

[26:13](#) Supervisor you can think is anyone at that, just say sort of mid-level management space. What really emerged from what we saw is depending on a supervisor, their knowledge, their workload, just a number of factors about level that had huge impacts for employee experiences, and their ability to navigate the policy.

[26:33](#) Again, it didn't impact whether or not people took it, or whether or not they took a full benefit of six weeks, they did. It had a lot of repercussions for how people experience that. Just again, from a public health perspective, so much research demonstrating that stress has huge impacts on low-end families, especially during critical periods like childbirth. Anything we can do to minimize that is really important.

[26:56](#) Even something like training supervisors to facilitate policy navigation in these spaces can have real public health impacts. As well as impacts on those particular employees, their families, and the organization. Supervisor training, I think was really the biggest thing that came out for us.



[27:15](#) I think as more and more states are thinking about implementing these kinds of policies. It's happening at the organizational level sort of voluntarily? But also as states are starting to develop these policies, there needs to be some translation of policies coming down from the states to organizations, so organizations have the resources that they need to implement them effectively and in a thoughtful way.

[27:39](#) That's going to be a challenge for it, because as you mention, organizations have different kinds of employees, different kinds of work that needs to get done. They all have their own challenges, but this is something that is important enough that we think it's worth investing in. It's worth figuring out how you implement these policies in a way that is equitable for everybody.

[27:57](#) I think for organizations who are adopting these policies, to be aware of research like this that's happening. I mean we're not the only people doing this work. California has been really active, Colorado. There are other places where you have great resources right there at your local university that you can reach out to.

[28:14](#) There's some great stuff in the peer reviewed literature as well, but a lot of that's being generated by folks like us who I think would be really eager to help engage in other evaluations that they roll out.

Host Sam G.: [28:24](#) Fantastic, so there's a long way to go with updating our family and medical leave policy in the United States. But if employers designate specific times that their employees can take advantage of this policy, they can better prepare themselves to accommodate the absence of employees who are taking leave.

[28:39](#) Yeah.

[28:41](#) I think that one of the issues that we discussed in this, what does it mean to be a family support organization? Of course Multnomah County and the other employers who have paid parental family medical leave policies, that's the first step in supporting families. But, it's how these policies are being



implemented, where we see the action. Along the way in the implementation of these policies, we detected that supervisors play a critical role. Even though on paper they have the same policy? Your experience with the policy is going to vary so much depending on how supportive your supervisor is.

[29:20](#)

That's great when you have one that is supportive and understands your needs]. Some of them could be predicted, and some of them cannot be predicted. That's great, because your supervisor understands that you need a different structure. But the issue is when you are not so lucky to have a supportive supervisor. That's when these policies, they need to level the field, so that everyone gets a good experience, above and beyond how nice your supervisor is.

Host Sam G.:

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Thank you all for sharing your expertise and your experience with Multnomah County. Hopefully this is just the beginning.

[29:53](#)

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[30:22](#)

This podcast is a production of the Oregon Institute of Occupational Health Sciences, and is hosted and directed by Helen Schuckers, Sam Greenspan, and Anjali Rameshbabu.

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