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# Cook County mandates last-minute paid leave expansion

By A.D. Quig

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Cook County Commissioner Alma Anaya speaks on Dec. 14, 2023, in favor of her proposal to expand the county's requirements for paid time off. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)

Just ahead of a new year’s deadline before a statewide law takes effect, the Cook County Board on Thursday unanimously approved a new paid leave mandate that applies to all suburban municipalities.

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require most employers to provide up to 40 hours of paid leave per year. Statewide, time off will be accrued one hour at a time for every 40 hours worked, or employers could front-load that time off. Those standards would be enshrined at Cook County businesses starting in 2024 whether or not the County Board took any action.

The county rules go a bit further, however. All workers — except for state and federal employees, students working for their college, and short-term employees of colleges and universities for less than one consecutive calendar quarter — would be covered. Airlines would also be included, as would employees of local governments not subject to a union contract. It also allows workers to take their bosses to court for violations, a process known as the private right of action.

In a release, Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle’s office celebrated its passage and pointed out the change “represents a significant shift” from the county’s current earned sick leave ordinance, which “outlined conditions during which earned sick leave could be used (e.g., when you or a family member are ill, receiving medical care, etc.). Paid leave, by contrast, can be used for any reason, providing more flexibility to employees in Cook County to take time off.”

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Suburban municipalities could opt out, but would still be subject to the state law. The county mandate takes effect Dec. 31, and enforcement begins Feb. 1.

"I think we just want to make sure that there's additional protections, including the private right of action, and including the airline workers," Commissioner Alma Anaya, the sponsor of the change, told the Tribune on Wednesday. "We want to just make sure that we're not going backwards."



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The ordinance was supported by the Chicago Federation of Labor, whose political director, Izzy Dobbel, told commissioners Thursday the mandate would be a win for workers and employers, giving workers much-needed time off for rest or family matters, and would help bosses with retention efforts. The CFL supported similar — but wider-reaching — paid leave expansion at the city, which they argued would lift the floor in labor negotiations across the city.

Unlike [the contentious debate](#) over Chicago's paid leave policy, which led to a notable split between Mayor Brandon Johnson and the business community, the county ordinance passed with relatively tame debate.

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Cook County Commissioner Bridget Gainer presides over the Cook County Board meeting on Dec. 14, 2023. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)

Some suburban commissioners fretted about a lack of outreach to municipalities and how violators — including mom and pop businesses — would be held accountable.

Commissioner Sean Morrison, the board's lone Republican, said a lack of clarity about how violations would be enforced — and whether bosses can fix their mistakes to avoid fees or fines — made it hard for him to support the change. He voted yes anyway.

"It's state law, so let's be practical: It's a moot point, we're just piggybacking," he said.

"We owe it to the private sector industry, to a limited extent, that we don't pass things that are harmful and burdensome," Morrison said. But his concerns about overreach were assuaged by assurances the board would have the power to establish the rules enforcing the new edict.