

# COVID Forced Employers to Reexamine their PTO Policies

Employee Benefits News | By Kayla Webster | 1/28/21



Photo by Ketut Subiyanto from Pexels.

Many employers are no longer required to provide paid leave for those affected by COVID-19, but that's not stopping them from giving workers the help they need.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act—which expired on Dec. 31—required employers to provide two weeks of fully paid leave to employees who've contracted coronavirus, and two-thirds pay to those needing to take two weeks to care for a loved one, according to the Department of Labor. While the FFCRA is no longer in effect, research from the insurance company Guardian Life

shows the mandate, and resulting local legislation, irrevocably changed how employers approach paid leave.

"Senior leaders have faced unprecedented challenges including shutdowns, managing employee absence and keeping up with new federal and state paid leave laws," said Chris Smith, head of group benefits at Guardian Life, in a release. "Employers are seeking permanent solutions to address workforce challenges as a result of the pandemic."

Three in four employers changed their unpaid leave policies to paid, and one in three employers created new and separate COVID-19 leave policies in response to the new laws, according to the Guardian Life study. Currently, 35% of U.S. employers offer paid extended family care leave, according to the Society for Human Resource Management.

While 77% of managers told Guardian Life that the legislation raised their awareness about the importance of paid leave, some employers have been ahead of the curve with their policies. In April, Microsoft offered employee parents an extra 12 weeks of paid time off to help them cope with school closures resulting from the pandemic. The benefit was available to both hourly and salaried workers.

The Big Four firm PwC also upgraded its leave policies to help parents and caregivers in their workforce. Employees now have the option to work a four-day workweek, set their own hours or switch to part-time. They can also take a six-month sabbatical and receive 20% of their normal pay. PwC leaders said they wanted to provide options that would help make the pandemic easier on all their employees — but they recognized some needed it more.

"What is happening right now is disproportionately affecting our women and people of color," said Kim Jones, people experience leader at PwC, in a previous report. "We want to help them succeed and make them proud of where they work."