

HOPES DIM FOR PAID LEAVE LAW DELAY



By Matt Murphy

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, JUNE 5, 2019.....The payroll taxes that will pay for the state's new paid family and medical leave program are likely to take effect as scheduled on July 1, according to House Speaker Robert DeLeo who all but ruled out a delay in the law on Wednesday after being given a deadline by Gov. Charlie Baker.

DeLeo, when asked if the House this week would take up a three-month delay in the implementation of the paid family and medical leave, told reporters, after a Democratic caucus, that it was unlikely.

"I don't think we will be," DeLeo said.

Baker, DeLeo and Senate President Karen Spilka have been talking in recent days about a possible delay and changes to the law requested by a coalition of business, labor, community and religious groups.

Baker said Monday that his administration was "ready" to implement the law as scheduled, but suggested that if legislative leaders wanted to pursue a delay it would have to happen this week.

"The governor was, I think, fairly clear in talking to the Senate president and myself this week, that we had to have a decision by Friday, otherwise he felt there wouldn't be sufficient time in which to educate the general public, the employers, the employees, in terms of what their rights and obligations are under the legislation," DeLeo said.

"So, I think right now since we really don't have a vehicle in which to bring it up before the full House, I think it would be very very doubtful that it would be coming up," he continued.

New payroll tax

Associated Industries of Massachusetts and the Raise Up Coalition, which had initially proposed a paid family leave ballot question last year, wrote to legislative leaders in late May requesting a series of changes to the law, as well as a three-month delay in the start of payroll taxes.

The Department of Family and Medical Leave plans to begin collecting a 0.63 percent payroll tax from employers July 1 to fund the estimated \$800 million paid family and medical leave program, which would allow workers and new parents to more easily take care of themselves, new children or ailing family members without facing financial crises.

The three-month extension, officials wrote, would provide time to address "the lack of employer clarity on the regulations," to communicate with employees about payroll deductions, and to enable insurance providers to develop products to assist employers.

Recommended amendments dealt with intermittent leave, serious health conditions, and measures aligning with the federal Family and Medical Leave Act.

Rep. Paul Brodeur, the co-chair of the Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development, did not foreclose action on other changes requested by the business and labor groups.

"No one has really talked in any detail about the other five items that were part of that package. Would we consider moving the entire package? I think we probably would, but there's still some work to do around that," the Melrose Democrat said.

Brodeur also said that he's had conversations with members of the governor's staff about the situation.

"The governor has also said he's ready to go, and we certainly take him at his word on that," Brodeur said.

A letter co-signed by 52 House and Senate lawmakers was sent to DeLeo and Spilka on Monday endorsing the delay. Rep. Joseph McKenna, a Webster Republican, was the lead signatory.

"We fear that maintaining the July 1, 2019 launch date will result in an incomplete and unsuccessful launch of the program, an unfair proposition to those who have worked so hard to this point, and to millions of MA residents," the lawmakers wrote. "It is our belief that a three-month delay, rather than weakening or undercutting the law and its intentions, will strengthen it and ensure a smooth rollout with broad adoption by all impacted."

The new law will provide workers with up to 12 weeks of job-protected paid leave to care for a seriously ill or injured family member, to care for a new child, or to meet family needs arising from a family member's active duty military service.

It also authorizes up to 20 weeks of job-protected paid leave to recover from a worker's own serious illness or injury, or to care for a seriously ill or injured service member.

Many of the benefits provided for in the law, including parental leave, will become available to workers beginning in 2021.

The Baker administration has already extended the deadline for employers to obtain private insurance for their own paid-leave program that would allow them to opt out of the state system, and gave employers an extra month until the end of June to inform workers about opt-out plans. -END-

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