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It's Time for U.S. Labor Law to Enter the 21st-Century

By Terry Neese

Work is good. The satisfaction that comes after a good day's work -- and seeing a tangible result -- is at the center of our identities.

But for women who work outside the home - - an unusual circumstance in the 1930s, when most labor laws were written -- that satisfaction can be complicated.

Rigid labor laws function in ways that can deny working women the opportunity to attend a child's soccer game or take a parent to the doctor one week and make up the hours the following week. Women need the ability to bend schedules in order to care for aging parents or, increasingly, an aging spouse. Our old-fashioned labor laws will not allow women to have this reasonable flexibility.

There's no reason to leave laws or policies in place when they impede our economic choices. Many changes are needed to bring aging institutions into sync with 21st-century life. We need to get started in making those sensible and overdue changes.

Rep. Kay Granger and other Republican members of Congress recently unveiled the American Families Agenda, which includes ideas that can help ease the regulatory burdens facing America's working people. They're not a moment too soon.

I've been blessed by the dynamism and vibrancy of the American dream. But these days, that dream is fading for some women.

In *Leaving Women Behind* -- written by John Goodman and Celeste Colgan of the National Center for Policy Analysis and Kimberley Strassel of *The Wall Street Journal* -- the authors confirm that current policies don't fit the common practices and practical needs of millions of American women. Our nation's employee benefit system needs to be reformed to meet the needs of women in the 21st century.

The Goodman book put an exclamation point on this. Women today, as he wrote, 'sit behind more desks, drive more cranes and build more computer chips. They do these jobs for longer hours. Yet women also continue to be the primary caregivers for their families. Working mothers are 83 percent more likely to take time off to care for a child than working fathers. And home life, with its soccer practices, doctors' visits, gymnastics lessons and home repair and maintenance, is more hectic than at any time in the past.'

We already know how to work hard. The question is now How can we work smarter and still meet the needs of our families?

The answer is compensatory time, better

known to federal workers as 'comp time.'

In 1995, a poll from the Employment Policy Foundation and Penn, Schoen & Berland and Associates found that, if given the choice, three out of every four American workers would choose compensatory time instead of overtime wages. It's not surprising that support for comp time reaches 81 percent among working women.

Many lawmakers have opposed making such changes in the private sector. However, in 1978, they changed the rules to allow this flexibility for federal workers. Such policies are common in state governments, including in my home state of Oklahoma (at least for supervisors).

Part of the American Families Agenda includes the Family-Friendly Workplace Act, sponsored by U.S. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash. She wanted to at NCPA. One would remove current time limits on access to continuing health insurance coverage. The second would create incentives for small businesses to join forces to buy good health insurance for employees.

The thoughts featured in the American

make it easier for parents with young children, and/or those who are caregivers for elderly parents, to accrue 'flexible credit hours' -- allowing workers to bank any hours in excess of 40 in one week to use toward paid leave.

Federal workers already enjoy this benefit, just as they have their own retirement system and more healthcare options than typical private-sector workers.

Another idea in the American Families Agenda would change income tax law to permit each married partner to file income tax returns separately, without causing the lower earner to be taxed in the higher-earning partner's bracket.

I'm also enthusiastic about two other ideas that are incorporated in the agenda, as they have long been advocated by my colleagues

Families Agenda provide a brand-new opportunity to create a national impetus for serious reform of our current crippling laws. Even in a presidential election year, I hope that at least some of these will be a source of unity in support of working women, and all working Americans.