

# The Washington Times

September 1, 2008

## Past Time for Comp Time

By Terry Neese

American workers are being challenged. The economy is taking its toll with increased layoffs and increased hours and work for those who have jobs.

The government's ability to help workers is limited, but it can do one thing - get out of the way!

Unfortunately, for many, our labor laws - originally crafted to protect the family and the work ethic - now obstruct both persistence and energy. Our ability to meet workers' needs in the face of an ever-diverse work force unfortunately has changed dramatically in the decades since most of our labor laws were written in the 1930s.

Between 1950 and 2000, the labor force participation rate of women between 25 and 55 years of age more than doubled. Today, more than 75 percent of these women are in the labor market. Fewer than 12 percent of mothers with children under age 6 were in the labor force in 1950. Now, more than 60 percent are working.

Today's rigid labor laws function in ways that can deny the opportunity to attend a

child's soccer game or prevent taking an elderly parent to the doctor one week and make up the lost work hours the following week. Women and men need the ability to bend schedules in order to care for aging parents or, increasingly, even an aging spouse.

In the 21st-century economy, women and men need adaptable and flexible work schedules to allow the time and energy required to give adequate care to our children, and to support the quality of life our retired parents and loved ones need and deserve in the land of the free. Our laws need to go back to when they allowed hard work to accomplish responsibilities both at work and at home.

One answer is compensatory time, or "comp time." A poll from the Employment Policy Foundation and Penn/Schoen Associates found that if they had the choice, 3 in 4 American workers would choose comp time instead of overtime wages. It's not surprising that support for the idea reaches 81 percent among working women, many of whom bear the primary responsibility for

caregiving.

In 1978, Congress took an important and needed first step to change the rules to allow this flexibility for federal government workers. A recently proposed bill, H.R. 6025, would allow such flexibility and alternatives to the 40-hour workweek for parents with children and caregivers for the elderly. It could shift the private sector toward greater use of compensatory time for employees who choose to take advantage of it. Why can federal government workers have this option and the private sector can't?

There also have been some recent rule changes to the overtime laws that applied to supervisory personnel. While welcome, flexibility and better telecommuting options.

Sometimes employers worry that offering more flexibility will reduce productivity - that employees will work fewer hours and get less done. In reality, according to the survey, the opposite is true.

Satisfied workers put in a lot more hours at work than others. The most satisfied reported averaging 56 hours a week - 11 hours more than the least-satisfied group. Almost without exception, as satisfaction rose, workers reported putting in longer hours.

America needs policies that work for people who work. American women - and all American workers - need flexibility,

these changes still exclude the private-sector workers who most need the benefits that comp time arrangements give to busy and stressed workers and their families.

According to a recent survey by Money Magazine and Salary.com, stressed workers aren't the most productive workers. Feelings of stress are closely related to longer commutes, less flexibility and more hours worked. The most stressed workers said too much work; their boss' behavior and long hours were the top causes of discontent.

Workers who expressed satisfaction at work had substantially better conditions across the board, with easier unscheduled time off,

portability and security in labor law and the provision of benefits.

Not only will these changes help individual employees and their families but, at the same time, American productivity should benefit as well.

As we approach Labor Day, it's time to make comp time available to all businesses. It would be just one step towards re-creating our system of labor laws. But there are many more steps needed to get there.

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