

Blog Post

NYC's Pet-Pawsitive Proposal: Paid Sick Leave for Pets Could Be Coming Soon

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By [Ten Stallings](#)

In recent years, there has been a growing shift in mindset for pet owners that consider animals to be essential to their well-being and integral to their home life. In fact, one [ASPCA survey](#) reported that, in the early stages of lockdowns and quarantines during the COVID-19 crisis, nearly 1 in 5 households acquired a cat or dog, and the [American Pet Products Association](#) reported that pet industry expenditure in the United States reached over \$147 billion in 2023. As this trend grows, workers are starting to seek employment benefits, like continued hybrid and remote working, to allow for the flexibility to take care of these new family members in their home. One of the most significant reflections of this policy shift is a newly proposed bill in New York City that would require employers to provide paid sick leave for workers who need to care for their sick pets. Here's what employers need to understand about this proposed change and how it could impact their workplace policies.

What Is the Proposed Paid Sick Leave for Pets?

Members of the New York City Council are aiming to combat the ongoing mental health crisis, and reduce stress for pet owners in the city, by introducing a bill that would expand the city's paid sick leave law to include time off for employees who need to care for their sick pets. If passed, the legislation would

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mandate that certain employers provide up to three days of paid leave per year for the care of a pet.

This initiative recognizes that many pet owners view their animals as more than just pets — they're often seen as family members. If enacted, this legislation would allow an employee to take time off for an ill pet's treatment or recovery, while also providing safeguards to the employee's income. The law would cover situations such as veterinary appointments, surgeries, or recovery from illness.

If passed, New York City would be the first to mandate paid leave to care for companion animals. Currently, the only other animal leave law is in Emeryville, California, which allows employees to use paid time off to care for service or guide dogs.

What Does This Mean for Employers?

Although this legislation is still under review, it has the potential to change the landscape of paid leave policies for businesses across New York City. And this proposal is just the latest in a steady expansion of local and state sick time mandates across the nation. Fifteen states plus Washington, D.C., and various other cities require private employers to provide their workers a few days each year of paid time off for health reasons, with many of them also covering “safe leave” for victims of violence or stalking. Adding to this list, voters more recently approved paid sick leave in every state that a new provision was on the ballot. On Election Day, measures in Missouri, Alaska, and Nebraska each passed by wide margins, showing an overwhelming desire from workers to ensure income protection while balancing their personal needs.

Employers with employees in NYC should begin thinking about the implications of such a law and how they might adjust their policies. Below are some key considerations:

1. Understanding Coverage

- **Eligibility:** The law would apply to companies with five or more employees in NYC, so small businesses with fewer than five workers might be exempt. However, employers with five or more people hired to work in NYC on a full-time or part-time basis will need to plan for the inclusion of pet care leave in their paid sick day offerings.

2. Legal Implications

- **Proof of Illness:** To prevent misuse, employers may require proof of illness or a veterinary note, especially for extended absences. It's important to develop clear guidelines on what constitutes valid documentation for pet-related sick leave and ensure that employees are aware of the proper process for taking this leave.
- **Protection Against Retaliation:** Like other forms of family or medical leave, employees will likely be protected from retaliation for using pet-related leave. HR professionals will need to ensure that the organization complies with these protections to avoid any potential legal issues.

3. Impact of Workplace Culture

- **Boosting Employee Satisfaction:** As the emotional bond between people and their pets continues to grow, offering pet sick leave could help improve overall employee morale. It demonstrates an understanding of employees' personal lives and shows that the company values their well-being.
- **Recruitment and Retention:** As workplaces become more competitive in attracting talent, offering pet-related leave could help an organization stand out, particularly in industries or regions where pet ownership is common. A thoughtful and inclusive benefits package can enhance an employer's reputation as a supportive and forward-thinking company.

Preparing Your Organization for Change

While the bill is still under consideration, NYC employers can take several steps to prepare their organizations for the possibility of a new pet sick leave law, including reviewing their current leave policies, planning for employee communication if the law is passed, and training management on how to handle requests for pet sick leave. If this proposal gains traction, it could signal an increasing demand for benefits that address employees' broader personal lives. Businesses could also consider offering other pet-related perks, such as pet insurance or flexible scheduling for pet care needs, to further enhance their benefits packages.

With growing interest in work-life balance, it may not be long before other cities or states follow suit with similar policies. Employers in other regions should monitor developments closely, as these changes could eventually impact their organizations as well. For questions, concerns, or other assistance regarding your organization's leave policies, reach out to your Akerman Labor and Employment attorney.

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