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FEW Washington Legislative Update
January 16-31, 2024

In Congress:

On Thursday, January 18, both houses of Congress approved a two-tiered stopgap funding bill that kicked the shutdown deadlines into March, sending the measure to President Biden's desk just one day before the shuttering of some agencies. The House acted quickly Thursday afternoon in a 314-108 vote after the Senate approved the bill earlier in the day. Lawmakers had until the end of the day Friday to avoid a shutdown for the first tranche of agencies that would have seen their funding expire.

On Monday, January 29, key congressional negotiators have reached an agreement on how to divvy up funding for the fiscal 2024 spending bills, clearing a major threshold that will allow appropriators to finalize those measures. The deal was hammered out after weeks of negotiations between Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., and Rep. Kay Granger, R-Texas, who respectively chair the Senate and House Appropriations Committees, and establishes how much money will be allocated to each of the 12 bills Congress must pass to fund government each year. With those allocations set, lawmakers can now complete their work of setting line-by-line funding for every program and office in agencies across government.

On Wednesday, January 31, a wide bipartisan majority in the House sent to the Senate a measure that would give low-income families about $700 in child tax benefits and restore credits that would allow states to build more affordable housing.The $78 billion tax package passed 357-70. It restores some of the popular expanded child tax credit, which cut the nation's child poverty rate by nearly half before its expiration at the end of 2021.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:

Make Gender Equality Count in 2024

It is no secret that women bear a disproportionate share of systemic burdens. While we have made strides in raising awareness about gender-based discrimination, economic inequality, violence against women and many other long-standing problems, we all know much still needs to be done. So, why haven't we yet achieved gender equality? A key barrier to reaching our goals comes down to one ingredient: money.

Overall financial support for initiatives and organizations that specifically support women and girls makes up a mere 1.8 percent of total U.S. philanthropic dollars, a stunning fact considering that women represent over half the population globally. It's even more shocking when you take a close look at the current state of women's rights and equality right here in New York City.

While the national gender pay gap is narrowing, the disparity in New York City has widened since 1997. Women make up approximately half of the labor force in New York City, yet, since 2017, they only earn 90 cents to every dollar earned by men. This gap is particularly pronounced for women of color: Black women earn just 57 cents and Hispanic women make only 53 cents for every dollar earned by white men.

Sadly, these statistics match Amplify Her Foundation's own research; over half of the 1,000 women surveyed across New York City's five boroughs reported experiencing gender-based discrimination in the workforce.

This discrimination in the workforce has an obvious knock-on effect on the larger picture of women's health and security. Women in New York City are more likely than men to live at or below the federal poverty line, the majority of whom are women of color, undocumented, or a combination thereof.

These aren't just quality of life issues. Poverty leads to a lack of health care, food insecurity, immense mental and physical stress and makes women vulnerable to unsafe or even deadly situations. For instance, a lack of financial resources is a major reason women are unable to leave their abusers. In 2022, the number of domestic violence victims in New York City increased by 8.5 percent relative to 2019.

While domestic violence isn't limited to one gender, women are disproportionately impacted: nationally, 25 percent of women have experienced sexual violence, physical violence and/or stalking by an intimate partner. Domestic violence can sometimes turn lethal; Black women are the most likely to be killed by their abusers.

There are countless other disheartening statistics that show how far New York City has to go to achieve gender equality. However, if the groups dedicated to addressing gender-based violence and discrimination received the level of support they deserved, New York City could become a national leader in its efforts to realize deep and lasting positive change in the lives of women and girls.

While the urgency of global conflicts, environmental disasters, threats to democracy, peace and security all demand immediate investments, none of these challenges can be solved without the full participation of women in all aspects of decision-making. Meanwhile, countless women's organizations are left fighting for a sliver of that 1.8 percent of funding, forced to make difficult and sometimes heart-wrenching decisions about what they can and cannot afford to accomplish.

The start of a new year is the time to think deeply about what kind of city we want to live in, and to set priorities for 2024 and beyond. We're asking New Yorkers to continue to strive for justice and equality by supporting the work of one of the many nonprofits committed to creating a better world for women, girls, and their communities. You can find them on the Amplify Her ® Foundation website, the New York Women's Foundation website, as well as numerous other online lists.

We are not alone in our quest to realize gender equality – myriad organizations are devoted to making it happen. They just need the funding to get across the finish line.

Sourced From: (NYN Media)

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Tier I

GAO: 4 Percent of Feds Used Paid Parental Leave in the Benefit's First 22 Months

The federal government's fledgling program offering agency employees up to 12 weeks of paid parental leave was used by 4 percent of the workforce over the first 22 months of its existence, a government watchdog said.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) on Thursday, January 25, published a report analyzing the government's implementation of the 2019 Federal Employees Paid Leave Act, which was enacted as part of the fiscal 2020 National Defense Authorization Act. It provides up to 12 weeks per year of paid leave in connection with the birth, adoption or foster placement of a child, provided the worker has been employed with a federal agency for at least one year.

GAO found that between October 2020 and July 2022, 4 percent of federal workers who responded to the 2022 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS), an annual governmentwide survey of federal employee attitudes, said they used the new benefit. Of those, 81 percent said they took advantage of the full 12 weeks of paid leave on offer.

For the 19 percent who did not make full use of their paid leave, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) told GAO researchers that the reasons varied based on the employee's gender, place in their agency's organizational chart, and cultural barriers to taking leave at some agencies. For instance, 60 percent of men who did not use all of their leave said they felt they could not be away from their work responsibilities for the full 12 weeks, compared to only 43 percent of women who used only some of their allotted leave.

"Members of the Senior Executive Service who used paid parental leave were less likely to use the full 12 weeks of leave than employees in other pay categories who also used the leave (around 65 percent for Senior Executive Service members compared to 81 percent for employees overall)," GAO wrote. "In addition, OPM officials told us they observed considerable agency variability in the 2022 FEVS percentages of employees who used paid parental but did not use the full 12 weeks of leave because (1) they were concerned about the impact on their career advancement, and (2) their coworkers and supervisors did not support their use of all 12 weeks of leave. OPM officials said that the variations may reflect differences in agency culture or the nature of the agency's mission."

While the vast majority—96 percent—of federal workers who took paid parental leave did so in connection with the birth of a child, with 2 percent each doing so in connection with an adoption or foster placement, some variances exist depending on which pay system the employee is enrolled in. Senior leaders saw higher rates of leave usage connected with an adoption or foster placement—in both instances, representing 9 percent of senior leaders who took leave, compared to the overall average of about 2 percent. And 6 percent of Federal Wage System employees who used parental leave did so in connection with the placement of a foster child.

GAO said that while agencies largely have done a good job of communicating the new benefit’s availability to employees, they could do a better job. First, some federal agencies were slow in advertising paid parental leave to potential job candidates on their website, though those agencies all updated their websites when researchers brought the issue up.

But OPM still has not updated its handbooks or fact sheets on leave issues to include information on paid parental leave.

“In September 2023, OPM officials told us that they had not yet completed updating the handbook and fact sheets on OPM’s webpage because it has competing priorities and limited staff available to updated paid parental leave guidance,” GAO wrote. “OPM officials said that they intended to do so as staff resources and workload permitted. In addition, OPM officials told us they initially waited to issue updated guidance until the FEPLA regulations were finalized, to give agencies time to administer the new benefit and identify any issues, and address any potential legislative changes to FEPLA.”

OPM agreed with GAO’s recommendation to update its leave informational materials, and said it hopes to update its handbooks and website to include information on paid parental leave sometime this year. And its own report analyzing the impact of parental leave on federal government operations, recruitment and retention is due imminently.

Sourced From: **(Government Executive)**

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Tier II

Is the 5.2 Percent Pay Raise Enough for Feds? Union Says No.

Thanks to several economic headwinds afoot, a record-setting pay raise for federal employees ain’t what it used to be.

Though President Biden inked the largest federal pay raise since 1980 last month, there are concerns from at least one federal employee union that ongoing inflationary pressures are eating into the 5.2 percent pay bump — a 4.7 percent across-the-board increase to basic pay, along with an average 0.5 percent increase in locality pay — that workers received.

Officials from the National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE), which represents more than 110,000 workers nationwide, said in a release earlier this month that inflation and a widening compensation gulf between the public sector and its private sector counterparts means the federal government must do more to help its talent keep pace with the economy.

“Thank you to President Biden for signing into law the largest pay increase for federal employees in more than 40 years,” said NFFE National President Randy Erwin in a statement. “Congress must understand that to attract and retain a skilled workforce that best serves the American people, we need to pay our civil servants competitive wages.”

The 5.2 percent pay raise was already somewhat of an anomaly, because it was initially proposed by the White House in March and saw backing in both the House and Senate versions of the fiscal 2024 National Defense Authorization Act, but still needed approval from Congress.

However, amid the ongoing budget appropriations impasse, Congress never offered its own pay raise plan before the end of the year, leaving President Biden to cement it by executive order.

However, NFFE notes that even with the executive order, federal employees in lower locality pay areas of the country could see a bump as low as 4.94 percent. Meanwhile, Federal Wage System employees could see shifting rates determined by “prevailing rate calculations for a specific area” and wouldn’t get the raise until fiscal 2024 pay limitations have been put in place.

Because of this, NFFE officials backed legislation from Sen. Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, last year dubbed the Federal Adjustment of Income Rates, or FAIR, Act. The FAIR Act proposed to raise federal employee wages by 8.7 percent when combined with base and locality pay, but the bill never made it out of committee.

This comes as Bureau of Labor Statistics data showed in November that federal workers made 27.54 percent less on average than their private sector counterparts, up from 24.09 percent in 2022.

To help ensure that federal employees can keep pace with the economy, particularly when agencies are striving to both attract and retain talent, some have called for strategies like incorporating incentive payments for sought-after positions as a way to narrow the private sector pay gap.

In response to a proposed Office of Personnel Management (OPM) rule issued Jan. 16 to expand the authority to waive the normal payment limitations on recruitment and relocation incentives, Partnership for Public Service president and CEO Max Stier said the federal government should widen its scope even further.

"The federal government should go beyond this individual approach and analyze the compensation for full fields of difficult to hire positions," he said in the proposed rule's comments. "This would enable agencies to provide competitive incentives to reduce pay gaps, quicken the time to hire more broadly and broadcast to current and potential employees that the federal government is willing and equipped to compete for their talent."

Meanwhile, NFFE officials said they will continue to call for broad-scale reforms such as updates to the Federal Wage System (FWS), better data to capture the economic growth happening in locality pay areas to elevate pay and better alignment between the FWS and General Schedule systems, for which there is currently legislation on Capitol Hill that the union supports.

Sourced From: [(Government Executive)]

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Tier III

<u>The House has Restored the Child Tax Credit. Here's How it Would Work.</u>

An overwhelming majority in the House passed a tax package Wednesday, January 31, that includes an increase to the child tax credit for low-income households. The restoration of some of the popular credit given during the pandemic, which cut the nation's child poverty rate by nearly half before its expiration at the end of 2021, would mean an average of between $670 and $730 in benefits per child, according to a recent analysis by the Urban Institute and Brookings Institution's Tax Policy Center.

That is much less than the roughly $3,000 expanded child tax credit distributed to all low-income households during the pandemic. The current proposal passed by the House will mainly help low-income households who make less than $58,000. Despite some Democrats' objections, Republicans would not allow the poorest households—those making $2,500 or less—to get additional assistance.

It is estimated that the new proposal would lift as many as 400,000 children above the poverty line and make an additional 3 million children less poor in its first year.

“It's certainly not everything that we would like to see,” said Scranton, Pennsylvania, Mayor Paige Cognetti on Tuesday before the vote, “but it’s a great step forward.”

Mark Ritacco, chief government affairs officer for the National Association of Counties, said the proposal is also welcomed by counties, which are required in many states to provide safety net services and “combat intergenerational poverty.”

The increase comes as many states have adopted or are considering adopting their own child tax credit. Lawmakers in Illinois said last week they plan to push ahead with a state-level credit regardless of what happens in Washington.

How quickly the Senate will take up the bill is uncertain as it is mired in a debate over the border and needs to pass 12 appropriations bills by March 1 to avert a partial government shutdown. Senate Republicans have not yet said if they will support it.

How the Proposed Child Tax Credit Would Work

The new proposal would work differently in several ways from the expanded child tax credit, explained John Buhl, senior communications manager for the Tax Policy Center.

Under the proposal before the Senate, the maximum amount of refunds households can receive would increase from the $1,600 the program currently gives out to $1,800 in this year’s taxes. Thereafter, it would rise to $1,900 in 2025 and $2,000 in 2026.

In 2025, the benefits will have grown enough to raise another 500,000 children above the poverty line, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. It would also boost support for another 5 million children still living in poverty.

But families would not be guaranteed to get the maximum per child, explained Andrew Lautz, senior analyst for economic policy at the Bipartisan Policy Center. Instead of being “fully refundable,” as the credit was during the pandemic, the proposal uses a formula based on how much more than $2,500 a family makes.

Sourced From: **(Route Fifty)**