

Forthcoming report:

November 9, 2010

**Today's Jobs for Today's Workforce:
Addressing Work-Family Conflict in Low-Wage Families**

Joan C. Williams, Center for WorkLife Law

Traditional "workplace flexibility" programs focus on flexible work arrangements for professional-managerial employees. These individually negotiated flexible work arrangements (FWAs) typically offer telecommuting, personalized control over schedules, and reduced hours in jobs where "full time" is defined as 50 or more hours a week and employees traditionally have been allowed to leave during the day so long as they get their work done. Advocates rely on the "business case for workplace flexibility," which focuses on the high cost of replacing highly trained workers.

This is not a model that works in low-paid jobs, where the costs of replacing workers are much lower. Even the traditional name does not fit: "workplace flexibility" in low-wage jobs typically refers to the employers' decisions to implement "just-in-time-scheduling" or similar programs designed to control labor costs by keeping a tighter match between supply and demand. An example: employer-initiated flexibility may favor workers who represent that they are always available for work, without guaranteeing them any given schedule, or number of hours, each week. This kind of "workplace flexibility" makes it more difficult for workers to arrange and pay for child care and to attend to other family needs.

To address work-family conflict among low-paid families requires a complete rethinking both of the name, and of the existing model, of workplace flexibility. Traditional flexibility programs such as FWAs, part-time schedules, telecommuting and flexible working hours have some applicability to low-paid jobs. But those programs, designed for a white-collar workforce, are not practicable in many low-wage jobs. Even where they are, these programs do not address many of the work-family conflicts faced by low-income families.

The forthcoming WorkLife Law report will draw on the expertise of the Kellogg Working Group on "Flexibility" in Low-Wage Jobs to develop effective practices for addressing work-family conflict in the low-paid workforce, along with a "business case" that details why employers can help their bottom lines by implementing these practices. The report will be accompanied by worksheets to guide employers in reassessing whether such practices as just-in-time-scheduling are helping—or hurting—their quest for profits.

If your company has a best practice you would like to share with WorkLife Law, for possible inclusion in the report, please contact us.

<http://worklifelaw.org/ContactUs/>