

GAO

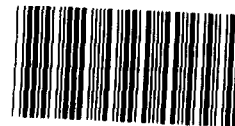
Testimony

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Family and Medical Leave Act of 1987

Statement of
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of the United States

Before the
Subcommittee on Civil Service
Committee on Post Office and Civil Service
House of Representatives



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Madam Chairwoman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to appear before the Subcommittee to discuss the parental leave policy of the General Accounting Office.

Before October 1982 when our current policy was established, the heads of GAO organizational units had complete discretion to approve or disapprove requests for leave-without-pay for maternity reasons. Maternity leave could be a combination of one's annual and sick leave and/or leave-without-pay.

When we looked into how maternity leave requests were being handled across the GAO we discovered that the majority of expectant mothers used a combination of accrued or advanced annual and sick leave for absences during the delivery and post-delivery periods. Some also requested and were routinely granted modest amounts of leave-without-pay. Occasionally, however, an employee would seek unpaid leave for an extended period. It was in considering these requests where we found that managers might apply differing criteria for deciding whether unpaid leave would be approved.

Sometimes approval may have been based on how long unit management thought an employee could be spared. Sometimes it may have hinged on whether the requestor was viewed as a superior or outstanding performer, as opposed to marginal or average -- the

better the job performance, the more likely the request would be approved as submitted, particularly if it appeared the employee might resign if the request was denied. In other cases, unit management may have set 90 days as its maximum unpaid maternity leave and routinely approved up to that amount irrespective of other considerations.

In light of these inconsistencies and the possible need to give more explicit recognition and weight to the expressed needs of new parents for unpaid leave, our Civil Rights and Personnel Offices developed a proposal for a revised parental leave policy.

Comments on the proposed revised policy were requested from all of our organizational units and our various employee groups.

Most comments supported the proposed changes, although some expressed concern over providing for less management discretion in acting on requests for unpaid leave. Our new policy then was put into effect in the belief that it was in the best interests of our employees and not incompatible with the interest of management.

These are the essential elements of our current policy:

--Employees may request and automatically receive up to 26 weeks of unpaid leave, in addition to any accrued annual leave, for purposes of providing (1) a period of adjustment with their

newborn infants, (2) time to render infant care and/or (3) time to make child care arrangements.

--Female employees may use sick leave, accrued or advanced, during the period a physician certifies they are temporarily disabled for maternity reasons.

--Paternity leave is also included in our policy. Male employees may request and receive annual leave and up to 26 weeks of unpaid leave to assist in caring for his newborn child, with the leave to begin after delivery.

--Adoptive parents are entitled to the same leave provisions as natural parents.

--Unpaid leave must be consecutive and specifically related to the need for infant care. The consecutive period requirement may be waived where it involves work for GAO and where the employee is agreeable to a limited work schedule.

--Finally, employees who take parental leave are entitled to continued employment in the same or a comparable position upon return to duty.

Since implementing our current policy more than 4 years ago we have received no employee complaints of arbitrary or uneven treatment or indications that the policy seriously impairs management's ability to efficiently operate our agency.

Last month we informally polled several headquarters units and 10 of our 15 regional offices on the amount of leave-without-pay

taken under our parental leave policy, and whether the requestors were professional or clerical staff. These results are summarized in the attachment.

We asked these units what kinds of problems, if any, they had encountered as a result of our parental leave policy.

They reported that they have not encountered serious managerial difficulties associated with the policy. Professional staff and their assignments can be shifted according to need. Extended absences by clerical and administrative personnel are a bit more complicated to accommodate. But reassigning some tasks, perhaps coupled with compensatory time off for extra hours worked, is usually sufficient to ease a particular situation.

Unpaid leave, regardless of the reason taken, is not without some cost to the government. Under the Federal retirement systems employees can receive up to 6 months of service credit while in non-pay status in each calendar year. Costs associated with this credit are borne entirely by the government; employee contributions for periods of unpaid leave are not required. While in a non-pay status employees are also relieved of their share of life insurance premiums. Health insurance, however, continues to be maintained by contributions from both government and the employee.

While costs are associated with unpaid leave under current procedures, GAO derives some benefits from its parental leave policy, intangible though they may be. The improved morale of our new parents and their good feelings toward the agency are obviously a big plus. GAO demonstrates its concern and support for them as they undertake an important responsibility.

I suspect, but am not in a position to demonstrate, that our policy has also helped us to attract and retain good employees who might otherwise have considered resigning if faced with the competing demands of very early parenthood and an employer insensitive to those demands. Recognizing the considerable expense of hiring, training and developing personnel, guaranteeing a reasonable amount of unpaid parental leave appears to be a sound investment.

Madam chairwoman, this concludes my prepared statement. We would be pleased to respond to any questions about our parental leave policy.

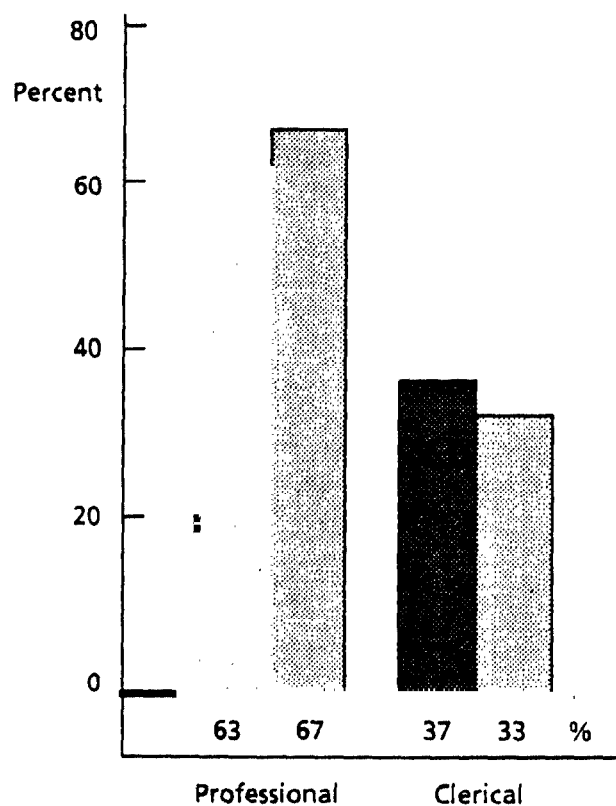
GAO Employees Taking Unpaid Parental Leave

Length of Employee Parental Leave Absences

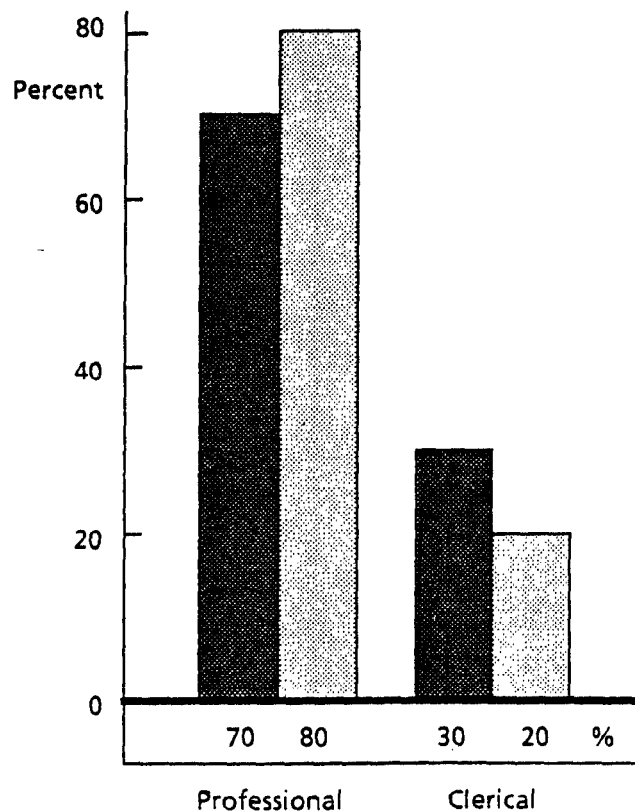
Location	Women Employees	Taking Unpaid Leave	Length 1 - 12 Weeks	Length 13 - 26 Weeks
Headquarters	763	49	33	16
Regional Office	432	54	33	21

Comparison of Professional and Clerical Absences

Headquarters Women



Regional Office Women



LEGEND



Percent in Category



Percent in Category Taking Leave

Headquarters and regional staff are shown separately because the statistics are for different time periods. The above statistics exclude three men who also took unpaid parental leave.