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Few Jewish Workplaces Have Family-Friendly Policies



Benefits: Vicki Compter, with Alex (left) and Max can work from home.

By Gabrielle Birkner

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Women make up about three-quarters of the Jewish communal work force, but few Jewish organizations have formal policies that guarantee access to paid maternity leave and flexible work arrangements — and fewer still offer paid paternity leave.

Even at organizations with paid parental leave policies, the amount of paid time off is often minimal, leaving new parents who depend on a salary to cobble together a longer leave from their vacation time, sick days and short-term disability benefits.

“It was stressful while I was pregnant — I had to save up my time off, so I would sneak out to my doctors’ appointments — and it was stressful after [my maternity leave], because it meant coming to work even when I had a nasty, nasty flu,” a rabbi and Hillel programming staffer at a large Midwestern state university who asked not to be identified by name told the Forward. “I cried every morning when I put my baby in the bassinet and left for work.”

And she was relatively fortunate, with a few weeks of paid maternity leave. Only 35% of Jewish organizations surveyed offer a new mother time off with pay to care for a newborn — with just 7% offering 12 or more weeks of paid maternity leave.

The statistics on maternity leave, from a new national study on work-life policies at Jewish organizations, showed that 10% of communal employers offer no maternity leave at all, paid or unpaid, and that fewer than 30% of organizations have formal, written policies allowing for flexible work arrangements, such as modified or reduced office hours, compressed workweeks and job sharing.

These findings reflect a disconnect between the community's oft-stated commitment to Jewish continuity and how communal organizations treat their employees, said Shifra Bronznick, founding president of Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community — the not-for-profit that conducted the study in conjunction with JESNA's Berman Center for Research and Evaluation. "We're not cavalier about the strains organizations are under, but it's time for Jewish organizations to align their values with their behaviors," said Bronznick, who co-wrote the report with Didi Goldenhar and Rachael Ellison.

The report, "Better Work, Better Life: Policies and Practices in Jewish Organizations," culls the results of an online survey taken by representatives from 227 Jewish communal employers. Respondents included employees at national organizations, religious institutions, local federations, community centers and social service agencies.

The results show that many American Jewish organizations do not approach work-life policies in a systematic way. While some 90% of employers surveyed grant staffers maternity leave that is mostly unpaid and offer some form of workplace flexibility, only a fraction of them have formal, written guidelines to ensure consistent access to these benefits.

"It's very important that it does not become about the benevolence, or lack of benevolence, of someone's supervisor," Bronznick said. "A lot of women are negatively affected by the perception of their supervisor that they are not serious about their work because they choose to have children and require maternity leave."

A 38-year-old New Jersey mother of three said that the informal policies at the large, New York-based Jewish organization where she worked for more than a decade felt unpredictable and fostered a culture of secrecy.

"There were quiet negotiations that took place, and they seemed to depend a lot on your relationship with your boss," said the woman, who recently resigned from the organization but still asked that her name not be published. "If your boss had the power to advocate for you, you might be able to swing working from home a little bit. But you didn't want to tell your colleagues, 'I'm allowed to work from home,' because you were afraid that it could be taken away."

She also said that her supervisors regularly scheduled meetings outside normal business hours, when she did not have child care, and that although she took a 20% pay cut to work four days a week instead of five, her workload was not reduced.

"It didn't lend itself to having a large family, and three is not so large," she said. "There's a push in the Jewish community to be fruitful and reproduce, but when you do, it's hard to maintain a job in a rigid environment."

To encourage organizations to respond to the needs of working parents, the AWP report advocates that parental leave policies ideally be expanded to three months of paid maternity leave and one month of paid leave for partners. While the federal government only requires organizations with 50 or more employees to grant up to 12 weeks of unpaid family or medical leave, AWP calls for Jewish organizations, regardless of size, to meet or exceed that standard.

By contrast, Israel's national insurance program grants its citizens 14 weeks of fully paid maternity leave, with options for unpaid extensions, tied to the length of employment; some of that paid time off may be taken by a male partner, should the mother wish to return to work before the 14-week period is over. In addition, a recently introduced bill, pending a Knesset vote, would make the three-month extension of unpaid maternity leave standard — and therefore not subject to an employer's approval.

AWP also recommends formalizing guidelines for securing flexible work arrangements, and rewarding employees for performance rather than for "face time" in the office.

The survey and report mark the first stage of AWP's Better Work-Life Campaign. The goal of the initiative is "to improve work-life policies at 100 Jewish organizations by the end of 2010," and AWP will provide consultative services toward that end.

Recently, several large Jewish communal employers, such as UJA-Federation of New York and Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, have taken concrete steps to strengthen their family-friendly policies. Over the past year, UJA-Federation moved to a policy in which staffers can take up to three months of paid leave, where it previously had a maternity leave policy composed of accrued sick leave and short-term disability benefits. During roughly the same period, Hillel doubled its paid maternity leave to 10 days from five and modified its sick-leave policy to allow employees to use that time to care for an ailing family member.

Generous maternity leave and flexibility policies can make a big difference, said Vicki Compter, director of capital gifts and special initiatives at UJA-Federation of New York.

Compter, a 38-year-old mother of two, gave birth to her first child two and a half years ago, when the federation's previous parental leave policy was in place. She took a maternity leave that included paid and unpaid time off as well as vacation and sick time she accrued during her 14 years at the organization. When she gave birth to her second child five months ago, she was entitled, under the new policy, to three months leave, fully paid. "This time around, I didn't have to worry that if, God forbid, something happens, I would have no sick days left," she said.

The organization has also allowed Compter, who lives in suburban New Jersey, to cut back to three days a week. "I have a long commute, so I don't see my children on the days I work," she said. "I couldn't bear not to see my children five days a week. This situation makes working manageable for me."

She said that though her portfolio has not been significantly reduced, she makes good use of her time in the office and works from home when necessary.

There are smaller employers doing their part, too.

Moving Traditions, an organization that develops programming on Judaism and gender, last year upped the paid parental leave for its seven staffers to a maximum of 16 weeks from two, thanks to underwriting from a board member. And American Jewish World Service, which covers 100% of health care premiums

for its 98-person staff, put in place a parental leave policy that affords mothers or fathers six weeks of paid leave. AJWS is looking into formalizing its flexibility policies.

Laura Sabattini, director of research at Catalyst, a group dedicated to advancing women in business, said that work-life policies have been shown to increase productivity, innovation and employee loyalty, and reduce likelihood of burnout.

Even so, strengthening such policies can require making difficult choices, and securing funding that is not readily available.

“In any given year, we may have four to six women out on maternity leave,” said Darlene Wolff, Vice President of Human Resources at the Associated, Baltimore’s Jewish community federation. “Paid maternity leave would be a major cost at an organization that is 80% female. With the economy and cutbacks, it gets pushed to the bottom of the list of what we’re trying to offer, because our top priority has to be providing health insurance, retirement benefits, vacation time and sick pay.”

The Associated is among the communal employers that have no formal parental leave or flexibility policies, though staffers said informal flexibility arrangements are widespread throughout the organization. New mothers can use their accrued vacation and sick time, and their short-term disability benefits, following the birth of a child.

AJWS, also faced with limited resources, decided to freeze salaries in order to fund the benefits package that its president, Ruth Messinger, says is consistent with the organization’s values.

“Some organizations, Jewish and non-Jewish, have values they try to live by, but they interpret their mandate as being what they do in the world,” Messinger said. “They don’t remember that it starts at home, and in this case, home is the office.”

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