

MiamiHerald.com 

Posted on Wed, Oct. 08, 2008

## Candidates need to address family and healthcare issues

By CINDY KRISCHER GOODMAN

The other night, as the first and only vice presidential debate was starting, I was scrambling to get home from the football field where I had been sitting on the sidelines with other parents.

The talk on the sidelines wasn't about Wall Street, or the stock market, or foreign policy or even our kids' performance. I heard about frantic searches for affordable healthcare coverage and escalating after-school care costs.

Clearly, times are tough. We are all worried about the economy. But more than that, most of us are worried about keeping our jobs and taking care of our families. We want to know what a new administration would do to ease our everyday work lives. Which candidates support paid sick days and expanding family leave?

Sure Joe Biden knows what it's like to be a single dad. But would he do anything to help single parents who must choose between a caring for a sick child and a paycheck?

"Enough hype about family values -- we want to know how candidates at all levels will value families at work," says Ellen Bravo, coordinator of the Multi-State Working Families Consortium.

After last week's vice-presidential debate, Bravo released a statement calling on both candidates to answer further questions about their policies for family friendly initiatives.

She says nearly half the private sector aren't covered by the Family and Medical Leave Act and close to three million who are can't afford to take it. And nearly half of private sector workers, 21 million women, have no paid sick days.

"There's a fear that it's going to get worse," Bravo says. Her consortium wants the next wave of politicians to support new workplace standards, which she thinks could be cost-effective.

In a conference call with reporters last week, women and family advocates said these issues are particularly important among female voters, who likely will determine the election.

"Everyone wants the soccer mom vote," says Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, executive director of Moms Rising, a grass-roots organization advocating family issues. She is urging her 150,000 members to submit questions for the presidential candidates in the upcoming debates. An example: In most American families, both parents work outside the home. Please tell us what your administration would do to help parents secure excellent, affordable child care.

"Right now our biggest opposition is the cultural misnomer that we don't have a problem," says Rowe-Finkbeiner. Her members are keeping track on her website when candidates speak in public forums on healthcare reform, paid sick days, fair pay, flexible work options, paid family and medical leave, and early childhood learning opportunities.

### GROWING PROBLEM

Debra Ness, president of National Partnership for Women & Families, warned that the lack of mandated paid sick days and family leave will become a bigger problem as more Americans cope with chronic conditions and caring for a parent.

"We don't have policies that reflect these realities," Ness said.

On their campaign websites, Barack Obama supports proposed federal legislation that will require employers to provide seven paid sick days per year. He also wants to expand the FMLA to cover more businesses and purposes.

John McCain opposes employer mandates for paid sick leave. However, he voted for FMLA in 1993 and says he supports modernizing the nation's labor laws so they allow for more flexible scheduling arrangements.

## **STUDENT LIFE**

College student Lee Taylor, 21, says she wants both a job and family. "It did not occur to me I would have to rally for those rights."

Taylor, a senior at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, wants to hear more from candidates about these workplace issues that affect her future. "I think lot of these candidates need to be careful about marginalizing some of these issues as women's issue."

Indeed, these issues have intense, broad-based support: A recent poll found that 89 percent of Americans are in favor of paid sick days, and 75 percent favor paid family and medical leave; more than 80 percent favor pay equality, with support coming from men and women.

Celinda Lake, president of Lake Research Partners, said people say they will vote for candidates supporting these issues. "People are worried about children in America, where you can't guarantee the next generation will be better off than this one."

That concern is valid. Will our kids be better off? Will politicians address the everyday issues that families who aren't part of Wall Street are facing? For working parents, that's something to consider from the sidelines and at the polls.