

# Benefits Insights

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## Bereavement Leave and How to Support Employees

Bereavement is an experience that follows the loss of a family member or friend. It's an inevitable part of life. Many employers recognize the emotional toll it takes on workers and implement bereavement leave policies. Offering bereavement leave is not just a legal requirement in some places but a way to support grieving employees during challenging times in their lives. This type of leave can be an important component of an employee benefits package and can positively impact employee attraction and retention. Bereavement leave acknowledges the emotional well-being of employees as they balance the demands of work with the circumstances of daily life.

This article explores the concept of bereavement leave and how employers can support grieving employees through leave and related benefits.

### Bereavement Leave Primer

Grief can affect a person's ability to function and cope. As such, bereavement leave is a specific type of time off granted to employees who have experienced the loss of a loved one. Additionally, some organizations' bereavement leave policies may allow employees to take time off for pregnancy loss (e.g., miscarriage or failed in vitro fertilization). Regardless of the circumstances, this leave allows individuals the time they need to grieve, make necessary arrangements and begin the healing process without the added stress of work-related responsibilities.

Bereavement leave may qualify as paid or unpaid, and its length varies by organization. A 2023 study by benefits consultant NFP found that 57% of organizations offer three days of bereavement leave, and 18% offer five days. In general, some company policies may provide a set number of days for immediate relatives (e.g., parents, siblings, spouses

and children) and fewer days for extended relatives (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins).

Federal law doesn't require employers to offer bereavement leave; however, some states have laws and regulations on bereavement leave. These laws often differ in terms of their requirements, including eligibility criteria, types of qualifying relationships, number of required days off from work, and whether leave is paid or unpaid. As such, employers should consult local legal counsel to ensure compliance.

### Employer Considerations

State and local bereavement laws are becoming more common; therefore, employers should familiarize themselves with applicable bereavement laws to ensure compliance. In places where there are no specific regulations, employers may adopt a bereavement leave policy based on best practices that meet their employees' needs.

Consider the following workplace strategies for bereavement leave and related benefits:

- **Establish a bereavement leave policy.** A clear and comprehensive bereavement leave policy should outline who qualifies for bereavement leave, the duration of the leave, any required documentation (e.g., death certificate and obituary), and other guidelines or procedures, including how to request leave. The organization will also need to decide whether the leave is paid or unpaid.



- **Review benefits and support services.** In addition to providing bereavement leave, employers may offer support services such as counseling or an employee assistance program. These types of resources can help employees cope with grief and provide a holistic well-being approach.
- **Offer flexibility and understanding.** Grief is a highly individualized experience, and employees may need different amounts of time to cope with loss. Employers may adopt a flexible approach, recognizing that each individual's grieving process is unique, and provide additional time off or flexible working arrangements.
- **Communicate with empathy.** Organizations should approach the topic of bereavement leave with sensitivity and empathy. Employers, managers and supervisors should assure workers that their well-being is a priority by encouraging open communication and allowing employees to discuss their needs during a difficult time.
- **Train managers.** Supervisors and managers should be trained to handle conversations about grief and support grieving employees. This could include being aware of the emotional impact of loss, demonstrating empathy and maintaining confidentiality.
- **Offer return-to-work support.** A gradual return-to-work plan or additional support could aid employees during the initial reintegration period. This can help employees ease back into their roles without feeling overwhelmed after bereavement leave.

### Summary

Whether required legally or not, bereavement leave can support grieving employees and foster a compassionate workplace. In turn, employers can build trust, loyalty and a positive company culture. Bereavement leave is more than just a policy; it demonstrates empathy and understanding that can have a lasting impact on employee well-being.

Contact us for more workplace resources.