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ABOUT NEW YORK

# Health Care? Not if You Can't Leave Work to Get It

By JIM DWYER  
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Adela Valdez made lamps in a factory at the back of a lighting store on Canal Street in Manhattan. The job paid minimum wage and no benefits. Last month, she got sick but went to work. On her third day of coughing and feeling generally crummy, she was feverish.



Jim Dwyer/The New York Times  
Adela Valdez

"I asked the boss for permission to go to the hospital," said Ms. Valdez, 39, a mother of four. "She said, 'It's fine, go — but you don't have a job anymore.'"

Now Ms. Valdez works three days a week taking care of an elderly woman.

To questions of cost and coverage, add one more detail to the national debate about health care: time. In New York, time may be more important than cost. The city's empire of public hospitals finds ways to serve hundreds of thousands of people who don't have enough money or lack private insurance. But people who have no health insurance through their jobs are not likely to have paid sick days, either. By some estimates, 765,000 workers in the city do not get paid when they stay home sick.

That would change under a bill before the [City Council](#), known as Intro 1059, which is backed by unions and [some health organizations](#). It would require all businesses in the city to provide paid sick time. Companies with fewer than 10 employees would have to give five days a year; larger businesses would be required to provide nine. Fines for not complying would be as much as \$1,000. Business groups like the [Chambers of Commerce in the five boroughs oppose the bill](#), arguing that the added costs might force some businesses to cut back on hiring.

Whatever its economic and social merits, the bill, if it becomes law, would bring the city into the workplace equivalent of the domestic dispute: intimate, furious, with the truth tied up in tangles.

For nearly seven years, Guillermo Barrera said, he arrived daily at 3:30 a.m. to work at the grill of a little diner in Bushwick. He peeled the potatoes and chopped the onions for the home fries. He mixed batter for the pancakes, loaded the coffee maker, brought in the bread, sliced tomatoes and diced lettuce. He worked 11 hours a day, seven days a week, and never took a vacation.

A few months ago, Mr. Barrera began to lose weight from a frame that was already slim, dropping 14 pounds. One Friday in September, sick as a dog, he had to leave the diner. He called his wife at 7 a.m. to pick him up. He ended up at Woodhull hospital for three days with a thyroid problem.

"The boss yelled," Mr. Barrera recalled. "She said, 'Don't come back. You're fired. You don't take this job seriously.'"

In an interview, the owner of the diner, Athena Skermo, said Mr. Barrera's account was a "total lie." She said she paid her employees when they got sick.

"He left me flat," she said. "He was gone three days; I never heard from him. Someone told me he said, 'I'm not going to work as a grill man anymore,' because the doctor told him he got sick from the grill. I had to take someone else."

THERE are plenty of employers who do give their employees time off when they are sick, because it's good for business. "You get more committed people if you stick with them when they have their crisis," said Freddy Castiblanco, owner of the [Terraza 7 Train Cafe](#) in Elmhurst, Queens, just down the block from the 82nd Street stop of the No. 7 train.

Mr. Castiblanco, who has five full-time employees, said that he had given his people time off when they were sick and that he supported the legislation to make it mandatory.

"I'm at a disadvantage with other small-business owners who are not responsible," Mr. Castiblanco said. "If we had a law, it would be equal."

There are other reasons, he said, for such a law: the costs that society has to take on when sick people go to work. Mr. Castiblanco, who was a doctor in Colombia before moving to the United States and hopes to pass qualifying tests this year to return to practicing medicine, said sick people should not be in a workplace where others might catch their ailments. "It's a matter of public health that you don't have contagious people in the workplace," he said.

And does he provide insurance to his employees?

"I tried," he said. "It was \$700 a month for each one. That would be more than my rent."

Does he have insurance for himself and his family?

"I can't afford it now," he said.

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