



# MAKING THE CASE FOR PAID FAMILY LEAVE IN INDIANA

By the Topos Partnership For the Indiana Commission for Women

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In recent years, several states in the U.S. have adopted a Paid Family Leave policy, to complement the unpaid leave guaranteed to some employees by the Family and Medical Leave Act. Currently, the Indiana Commission for Women is investigating the feasibility of such a policy for the state. One important question is whether the public is, broadly speaking, on board with such a policy. But to determine whether there is public support, it is also helpful to know how the policy might be framed in public discourse.

Importantly, any communications strategy would need to take into account multiple audiences: advocates (who will carry the message), business leaders (who will be a strong voice in the debate), legislators (who are the primary actors), and members of the public (who would help create the demand for legislators to act).

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## POSITIVE PUBLIC CLIMATE

The Topos research commissioned as part of this feasibility study<sup>1</sup> suggests *that there is indeed public support for paid family leave, that Hoosiers are generally supportive and ready to dismiss most objections once they hear about the possibility of PFL*. Hoosiers tend to see PFL as an important benefit for families, as well as a benefit that businesses can afford and may even owe their workers due to the value they contribute. It is very easy to create an engaged and positive conversation about the topic with members of the public, by approaching it from any number of angles—particularly, but certainly not exclusively, among women or people who have some prior experience with family health situations.

## CHALLENGES

On the other hand, there are also a number of important challenges—perspectives among the public and leaders that can derail a conversation or get in the way of support:

- **Skepticism:** One of the broadest and most important challenges amounts to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Both the public and leaders are so skeptical of the realistic chances of the policy being enacted (because Hoosiers “believe in self-sufficiency,” because Indiana is a “business-first” state, because the state “is not a leader” and so forth) *that the skepticism itself is probably a major barrier*.

Additional challenges include perspectives that both insiders and everyday people adopt some of the time:

- **Zero-sum perspective:** Put simply, benefits for employees can be understood, by default, as burdens for businesses that hurt their bottom line and even threaten their viability.
- **Skepticism about government:** Some Hoosiers reflexively object (or assume others object) to government “interference” in jobs and the economy, and to any additional mandates on business.
- **Personal responsibility:** An aspect of Indiana’s overall conservatism is an emphasis on individuals’ responsibility for their own economic wellbeing, including how they prepare for hard times, and the choices that led them to the job they have.

<sup>1</sup>The research consisted of ethnographic visits to Indiana communities, small group telephone discussions and online “TalkBack” testing, as well as telephone interviews with leaders from various sectors. This research took place in the Fall of 2017, and included a diverse pool of nearly 700 Hoosiers from the general public, as well as seventeen leaders from the business, public and nonprofit sectors, recruited by the ICW.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## COMPELLING FRAMING

The strongest case for PFL, that engages the broadest audience, highlights how PFL is *good for the economy*. More specifically:

### PAID FAMILY LEAVE WOULD BOOST THE INDIANA ECONOMY BY:

- Helping businesses hire and retain good workers,
- Improving employee morale and productivity, and
- Assuring that people stay employed and have money to spend.

When expressed clearly and straightforwardly (see Sample Language below), these ideas are compelling and memorable (i.e. people repeat and use them themselves), and shift attitudes in the right direction. An emphasis on the Economic Benefits from PFL—and the straightforward mechanisms that create these benefits—strengthens the support of people who are already inclined to like the idea by creating a new, practical rationale. The Economic Benefits frame essentially gives these individuals permission to take the position they want to take. This emphasis also inoculates against some of the doubts and objections of people who might otherwise reject the idea.

There are also two other key elements to an effective communications approach—i.e. one that leads to an engaged and constructive attitude toward PFL:

**Reminder that it meets a basic, universal need:** By default, people recognize that everyone could benefit from PFL, so all that is needed is a brief reminder in clear language.

**Implication of momentum:** Because of widespread skepticism, it is probably very important to convey that others in Indiana are supportive of PFL and that there is movement in this direction. The idea that there is “social momentum” towards a given policy is often very compelling.

The following sample language illustrates how main themes can be combined in a single clear and effective text.

### Sample Language

*More and more Hoosiers recognize that offering paid family leave to employees is a smart way to boost our state's economy. For one thing, it helps attract and keep good workers, which benefits both companies and Indiana's economy. It also means workers are confident that they won't lose pay when someone in the family gets sick and needs help, so they will still have money in their pockets to spend in local businesses. Studies have even shown that when employees can earn time off for family leave, they are less stressed and more productive at work. It's time to take this step to move the Indiana economy forward.*



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## POLICY-RELATED CONSIDERATIONS

A number of details of the PFL conversation hinge on particulars of policy that will need to be carefully considered and framed. These include:

**The ability of small companies to “get the job done”:** Even independent of costs, there is a tendency to worry about whether a small company can continue to function when people are missing.

**Employee contributions:** The idea that modest employee contributions spread the costs of PFL and lessen the burden on businesses is strongly compelling and reassuring to many, but on the other hand can suggest that PFL will mean another “tax” coming out of workers’ paychecks.

**Universal mandate:** The majority of Hoosiers who see PFL as a good idea for the state often assume it would be offered to all employees in the state (rather than on a voluntary basis). There are significant enough sensitivities to “requirements” and “mandates” on businesses that these can sometimes derail the conversation, but overall we believe the recommended narrative can helpfully inoculate against these concerns, and that it is possible—at least for the public—to make a compelling case for a statewide requirement.

## INSIDER AUDIENCES

While insiders and the public share many of the same perspectives and concerns, the research suggests several ways that communications with the two groups are different, even if overall themes and emphasis are the same:

**Skepticism based on “political realities”:** Stakeholders are often very skeptical about whether the state might realistically adopt a PFL plan anytime soon. Therefore, information about public support and anything that might count as “momentum” can be particularly valuable with this audience.

**Interest in case studies:** Much more than the public, stakeholders are interested in information about how PFL works in other states—evidence of viability, how much employees contribute, and so forth. For insider communications, it is important to refer to these successes and be prepared to offer data and details.

**Big-picture economic view:** More than the public, stakeholders tend to take a statewide view of the economic pros and cons of PFL. For instance, the idea that the benefit would help attract and retain workers *in the state as a whole* (and not just individual businesses) should receive even more focus with insiders than with the public.

There are a number of seemingly promising communication directions that fail to move the needle when treated as the main focus—such as the idea that PFL is a reflection of “family values.” The full report from this effort discusses various directions that miss the mark.

# METHODS



Developed over a decade of close collaboration between its three principals—a cognitive linguist, a public opinion strategist, and a cultural anthropologist—the Topos approach is designed to deliver communications tools with a proven capacity to shift perspectives in more constructive directions, to provide a deeper picture of the issue dynamics communicators are confronting, and make visible the fundamentally different alternatives available to them.

For this project, Topos undertook multiple, complementary research efforts with an ethnically and socio-economically diverse sample of 691 individuals from all over Indiana.

## STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

A set of in-depth interviews with a group of leaders from various sectors (recruited by the ICW) allowed us to explore how two important sets of potential allies and messengers—policymakers and businesspeople—think about the topic, and how their thinking differs from the public's. Modeled to approximate natural conversations, the interviews explored how these stakeholders think and communicate about the topic, and included message assessments to understand how stakeholders thought about key concepts. Topos conducted 17 interviews by phone; each lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. (All interviews were anonymous.)

## ETHNOGRAPHY FIELD TESTING

Ethnographic research provides a deep view into people's experience of the world—through observation and description of people in their natural environments, on their own terms, rather than on terms imposed by the researcher. In October 2017, an anthropologist conducted 53 semi-structured interviews, which approximate natural conversations but are carefully designed to expose the underlying cultural and cognitive models that people use to think about a topic. Research subjects included a diverse group of Hoosiers in and around Fort Wayne, Kendallville, Auburn, Warsaw, Wabash and Marion.

## TELEPHONE MINI-GROUPS

This method allowed subjects to think aloud about the issue from a wide variety of perspectives, and was designed to reveal how various ideas and considerations play out in group discussion. Each group focused on multiple messages and allowed researchers to observe how non-experts think about these distinct concepts, including whether subjects understood and could repeat the core of each message, pass it along to others, and use it to push back against potential opposition. At the same time, the dynamics of small groups show how subjects respond to and interact with the ideas of other subjects, mimicking how they would engage with the perspectives of other people in their lives. Subjects included 15 individuals from all over Indiana, diverse with respect to race, gender, politics, education and income.



## TALKBACK

In the TalkBack method, developed by Topos principals, subjects are presented with brief texts (roughly 100 words) and then asked several open-ended questions, focusing in part on subjects' abilities to repeat the core of the message, or pass it along to others. TalkBack texts generally focus on a single key concept, such as a particular aspect of a complex issue. New terms are often introduced as well in order to test their clarity and memorability. Importantly, one of the purposes of TalkBack—and the Topos approach in general—is to explore what is taken away from a message as opposed to what is intended. Listeners often hear something quite different from what the speaker meant to convey. (One of the shortcomings of testing approaches that focus on “agreement” or enthusiasm is that they can inadvertently measure responses to a point that was heard but not intended.) Parameters of success include subjects' abilities to remember, explain, use and repeat the explanatory ideas and key terms. The testing is designed to assess whether a given idea has the capacity to become an organizing principle for thinking and communicating in a new way about the issue, as well as its overall effects on reasoning and engagement.

In TalkBack Testing, a pool of over 600 subjects responded to a total of 14 distinct messages presented. Three rounds of TalkBack testing allowed researchers to refine the messages based on previous responses to pinpoint certain understandings and frames of understanding.

# BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT



The best news coming from the Topos research effort is that, for many Hoosiers, PFL seems like a common-sense, straightforwardly positive policy. It is frequently understood as a benefit that almost every employee would need at some stage of life. People think positively about the policy, both in emotional terms (everyone should be able to take care of loved ones when needed) and economic ones (no one should have to worry about losing a job or go into debt if they need to take care of a family emergency).



# BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT

## A BASIC NEED

Most fundamentally, Hoosiers tend to see PFL as a benefit that can be important to everyone, for obvious reasons having to do with caring for family.

*I've always said family's the most important thing. I've been a boss a lot of my career, and family's always come first for all my employees. That's always been my take on it, so I've always been as flexible as possible with that.*

- White Conservative Man 56 Auburn

*If a mom or a dad needs to take off time and look after a kid, why should they have to choose between the two [a job or their child]?*

- White Moderate Man 31 Fort Wayne

*I'm just thankful that Indiana's considering this, and realizing the importance of it. And I think that family medical leave is very important. A very important benefit that we do need to be considering.*

- White Conservative Woman 59 Andrews

## MUTUAL BENEFIT BETWEEN EMPLOYEES AND EMPLOYERS

PFL generates immediate support and strong engagement from people who tend to see a fundamental relationship of mutual benefit between employees and employers. From this perspective, a win for employees is a win for employers because employees are the heart of any business.

*If you treat your people right, if you treat them with compassion and understanding, you're going to get more out of them.*

- White Moderate Woman 74 Auburn

*Well, I like the point where it emphasizes how the companies and individuals, they're both in it together. And the companies can benefit the individuals and the individuals can benefit the company. I think from that point of view it's kind of bringing into focus how important employers are to pay attention and care for their workers. So I like that aspect of it.*

- White Conservative Woman 65 Bloomington

# BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT

## CENTRAL VALUE OF LABOR

The everyday Hoosiers who participated in the research tend to feel strongly that the profits of businesses are made possible by the work of the employees themselves. For many people labor is not seen so much as a cost, but rather that there would be no profits without their labor. In this understanding, PFL is not an extra perk but a recognition of the centrality of employees to the employers.

*But who makes the money for the companies? It's the employees. It's not the CEOs. It's not the general managers. It's the people out there in the factories plugging away day after day, sometimes six-seven days a week, ten hours, twelve hours a day. They're the ones who get the shaft.*

*– White Moderate Woman 74 Auburn*

## ETHNOGRAPHIC VIGNETTE

Standing outside the restaurant where he worked in Fort Wayne, a mixed-race, 44-year-old chef explained that having spent his life working in the service industry, he saw the ins and outs of how workers are treated. As it drizzled, he expounded on the disconnect between being treated as just another worker in a revolving door industry, where he knew he could be replaced, and speaking about how essential his role was in keeping the restaurant running and profitable. While his employers over the decades had not always fully appreciated the ways he contributed to the restaurants, he said he learned he had to tell them and show them his worth. He would make sure to test the waters where he worked by asking for occasional time off for smaller things, like taking care of his son every once in a while. Pointing out such a thing was unheard of in the “chef world” because you were expected to work weekends, holidays, and every day the rest of the world likes to have fun, he remarked that it took him too long to realize how important it was to have boundaries. Years before, he watched a bartender friend at another restaurant be denied time off to go to his father’s funeral. That friend’s employers threatened to fire him but his friend went anyway, in essence calling the employer’s bluff but fully expecting to be fired. He said it made him realize that he too, or anyone in the service industry, could be fired for having “life come at them.” So he decided to be proactive and establish that his “family always comes first” with his employers, by making sure he could take time here and there to do important but small things, so that when it came to the really big things he would not have to worry about his job. All in all, this process was framed as a way for him to have security and peace of mind **while reminding his employers that it was his work and expertise that allowed their places to flourish.**

# BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT

## THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Many Hoosiers in the research had firsthand experience of needing to take time off to care for a loved one in sickness and in death. This experience strongly underscored for them how crucial PFL was, and how devastating it might have been if they did not have access to it.

The research suggests there is a large and widespread pool of support to build on based on personal experience.

*I retired early to take care of my elderly mother. I took a hit on my social security. It cost me thousands of dollars. When after five years she got worse, I had to put her in a nursing home and take out a home equity line of credit to help pay for her care. I think people who take care of others at home, whether it's children or the elderly or the disabled, ought to get a tax break.*  
– White Liberal Woman 68 Auburn

*I know from personal experience, I took two extra days off and almost lost my job and my house. So if there's a guaranteed way that you can have pay and be structured, then I think the whole process of the newborn or helping someone who's sick would go a lot smoother.*  
– African-American Conservative Man 21 Kendallville

*So, it's really difficult because I'll admit, I'm actually in this situation right now. I've had to take time off from working altogether because I'm taking care of my disabled mother and we only have one income now, and it's extremely hard. We can't even buy something sometimes, and we live paycheck to paycheck, which only comes once a month. A lot of the time, we don't even know what we're gonna do as far as eating goes.*  
– White Liberal Man 27 Middletown

*I mean I think it's crucial. I mean I've been in a couple of situations myself when a family member was sick and I didn't have any PTO, and I just had to take off work unpaid. And I mean it really hurt our financial situation. Not only was my spouse out of work without pay, so was I. Then, we had to get financial assistance from people and from our town. I would rather be able to support ourselves, whether it's through our employer. I don't really want to have to rely on other sources.*  
– White Conservative Woman 30 Dyer

*I've actually had to use it. I've had to have back surgery from a firefighting injury I had a couple of years ago. It helped us, because then we didn't have to worry about having to save money while I was out on recovery from surgery. Because we had the FMLA helped pick up [sic], or eventually paid, was paid to us as if it was part of our paycheck.*  
– White Conservative Man 41 Fishers

*I had surgery a year ago for uterine cancer, and I was off for eight weeks. I had to miss six weeks to get paid for my eight weeks. Without having my time in, I would've been hurting. And then it's only not even your whole check—it's just a little bit of your check. I got like \$100 and some. So I saved for a couple months to try to make it through bills and stuff, but it really wasn't enough. By the time they take out insurance and stuff, I didn't have that much money left.*  
– White Independent Woman 42 Marion

*We're a single income family of six, so if my husband should have to take time off and it's not paid, we would lose our house, our cars. I mean it would be detrimental to our lives. My husband can't take time off unless it's paid time off, because we do just have the one income.*  
– White Liberal Woman 38 Indianapolis

# BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT

## SIGNIFICANCE FOR WOMEN

Women, more often than men, both in the general public and stakeholders, expressed strong support for PFL, often because they have been in the situation of caring for a family member. Plus, the gendered expectations of care, both on a societal level and at the level of the family, mean that women tend to shoulder the burden when anyone in the family is sick or needs help. So women can anticipate they will need access to PFL, even if they haven't yet in their lives.

*We've had three children and I've always worked part-time in law offices, but they've always been small offices. I've had to leave my job every time because I can't take off.*

- White Conservative Woman 55 Auburn

*Also, if it was something that was required or in place then it would encourage more businesses to do that, which would create an environment where women didn't have to make the decision between work and family. They would feel like their employer was actually supporting them in starting a family. They wouldn't feel guilty about it as well.*

- Female Stakeholder Interview

*I know I would've loved it if, when I had my children, if my husband had been able to take paid family leave so he could be home to help me out, as a new mother, go through the not so sure of yourself stages. And when my father was sick and I had to take time off work, paid family leave would've been very beneficial for me.*

- White Conservative Woman 59 Andrews

*I've talked to folks who've said off the cuff that maternity leave is a waste of money for employers and it's costing companies millions of dollars, or things like that. I just responded and said that having had two children now, and I've taken two maternity leaves, I hoped that my company didn't view me as a liability or a big expense, but that [unintelligible] allowing me to have that opportunity to spend with my kids, and I came back to work. If I hadn't had that ability to take the time off and to receive some pay, I don't know what the decision would've been for my family—if it would've been worth it to come back to work.*

- Female Stakeholder Interview

*Due to my own observations of female talent that we were losing—they just weren't coming back to work. One of the things I realized was that by the time they had made that decision, which is emotional in itself, even if you were more than willing to create a more flexible schedule for them, they'd already made up their minds—it was too late.*

- Female Stakeholder Interview



# BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT

## DISMISSING OBJECTIONS

Reflecting both their general support for the policy, and their cynicism about business and government elites, members of the Indiana public often reject arguments against PFL out of hand—sometimes dismissing them as mere “excuses” not to offer PFL.

In response to the idea that businesses “can’t afford” to offer the benefit, many Hoosiers pushed back based on their cultural understanding of the distribution of costs within a business or place of work. The idea that profits would inherently suffer because a company offered benefits was met with skepticism by many, in part because they imagined that business profits were healthy and there are generally well-compensated owners and management. Operating from this perspective, Hoosiers argued it was a matter of allocation, meaning there is enough money in profits and in the large salaries of higher-ups to make up for any cost of the benefit, and therefore the real problem is unwillingness on the part of employers rather than actual “affordability.”

*I think I'd like to see those numbers, because I think often-times we get told about the boogiemans of lost profits and lost jobs. I'd like to see the study that's showing that first of all, and why you can't let an employee go for a few months, when your overhead... And so many of these companies, even small businesses, let's call it what it is.*

– White Moderate Man 31 Fort Wayne

*I'd say prove it...I don't think that's the case at all. It might be if it was a mom and pop thing where it's just a couple of employees and they're on a shoestring to begin with, but if it's a corporation that has multiple employees, I'd say prove it—I don't believe it.*

– White Moderate Man 71 Fort Wayne

*As much money as they're making off of us? They should at least be able to put a foot forward and think about how we feel as smaller people. You have CEOs and the president making millions of dollars off of our work, but they can't give you paid time? But they get paid time and holiday leave—all that. But us?*

– Native American/Black Liberal Woman 62 Fort Wayne

When the possibility of “fraud and abuse” is brought up, many members of the public similarly dismiss the objection on the basis that PFL is the right thing to do. Even if a few people might try to take unfair advantage of PFL, this isn't an argument for depriving everyone of such an important benefit.

*Make it time-limited, and don't allow for it to be abused. Just because a few people abuse things doesn't mean it should be taken away from everybody.*

– White Liberal Woman 68 Auburn

*I feel like that will happen, but it's certainly better having it that way than someone who really needs it going without.*

– White Conservative Man 25 Fort Wayne

*People that are going to be fraudulent and abuse systems are likely going to be not the best employees in the first place.*

*I feel that people can't fake genuine emergencies as they are going to explain some of what is going on to employers. There should be obvious limits. I think happy employees make better work regardless of the type of work and that would be good for Indiana or anywhere else.*

– White Liberal Woman 39

# BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT

*I believe in the good in people and think it would be used appropriately. I know that it would be a great incentive for Indiana and up the productivity of any employee. It may be abused if someone does not have an emergency, and asking employers to do more and publicize it would definitely increase their gains!*

*- White Moderate Woman 29*

*Because making out workers—the literal HEART of business—to be villains is wrong. Would people take advantage of it? The question is not would. The question is how employers would weed out that possibility. Life happens. It is not a difficult concept to grasp. They should care for their workers. Or try to.*

*- White Liberal Woman 26*

Fraud should not be dismissed by communicators as a trivial consideration, since even strong supporters of PFL often wondered about how to deal with people cheating the system and mentioned the topic unprompted. However, they rejected the notion that we should make decisions based on the exceptions; employers/legislators should not use possible fraud as an excuse for not offering the benefit.

Finally, most Hoosiers dismissed the idea that a voluntary system, where it is entirely up to employers to decide if they want to provide the benefit, is sufficient for the needs of real people. Instead, they recognized that many employers are not going to offer PFL out of the goodness of their hearts, even if their employees want and need it. Many see a voluntary system as a half-measure, whereas statewide PFL would be the ideal.

*We shouldn't have to legislate humanity and kindness and virtues and morality and all those things, but our world is so depraved I think we have to force it on companies.*

*- White Liberal Woman 68 Auburn*

*Voluntary is too slippery. It's too scattershot. There are definitely companies that I think would go ahead and implement it if it was voluntary, or would continue to implement it, but making it just something they can opt into or that people will—maybe people will take a cut of their paychecks and put it into the company to redeem at a later date—it's a possibility, but in terms of actually making things better for everyone, I think it's a half-step. It doesn't actually get closer to the root of the problem, and it's more like a band-aid over it, but you're still scratching through the band-aid.*

*- White Liberal Man 25 Fort Wayne*

*It's got to be like everybody is all in it or not. Let's say like the fast-food jobs get it and the factory jobs, like the 12-hour shift people, they really have people who are sick and working that extra pay job just so they can afford hospital bills—there are some people where there's \$1 difference to where they have paid insurance and 401Ks and stuff like that. It doesn't seem like much in the moment, but in the future it really makes a difference. If they're going to do it, they all have to do it.*

*- African-American Conservative Man 21 Kendallville*

*I think if we gave companies the ability to skip out on OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration], they would, because they don't want to pay for those days of training and making sure things are up to code and such. So we have to make them do it [offer PFL]. I'm a big capitalist, and I think the free market can decide, but every now and then the free market doesn't decide. We've given them about 100 years now to make up their minds, so maybe it's time to make something happen.*

*- White Moderate Man 31 Fort Wayne*

*I would mandate it because if not, the company would be like, 'Oh well, I don't really have to do it.'*

*- White Independent Woman 29 Fort Wayne*

# BROAD PUBLIC SUPPORT

*I believe that offering employees paid time off for family emergencies would benefit both sides. However, having been in the workforce for 30+ years, I know that many companies would not offer this benefit unless mandated. Unfortunately, there are too many companies that don't care at all about their employees and feel it's easier, and cheaper, to actually encourage turnover to keep salaries and benefits down. This was widely proven when it was mandated that any employee that worked 40 or more hours per week had to be offered health insurance by their employer. I saw many companies (and worked for one at the time) that cut employee hours to ensure that no one would get 40 hours in a week. These companies would absolutely never offer paid family leave if left up to them.*

– African-American Moderate Woman 56

## BOTTOM LINE

Once they hear about the policy, the majority of Hoosiers feels strongly about the importance of PFL and would see it as having immediate positive impact in their lives. PFL is often seen as a common-sense solution to real life situations they or others have encountered. They also tend to see businesses and employees as inextricably linked, so that PFL is just as beneficial for employers, and the economy more generally, as it is for employees.

Importantly, though, while people tend to share a basic understanding that a benefit like PFL is important, they are not necessarily skilled or confident at talking about it or pushing back against objections. On the other hand, they are open to hearing such arguments.

In the next section, we turn to a set of problematic perspectives shared by some members of the public—and even more so, among leaders.

# CHALLENGES



Despite broad public support for PFL, the research as a whole, across methods, also confirmed that there is an important set of challenging patterns in Hoosiers' thinking about PFL that would need to be kept in mind and successfully navigated if such a policy were considered in the state.

While these perspectives do not tend to predominate in Hoosiers' default thinking, some may have the power to derail the conversation at times—and may represent perspectives that PFL opponents might tap into successfully.



## SKEPTICISM ABOUT POLITICAL CHANGE IN INDIANA (SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY?)

Both the public and stakeholders expressed a great deal of skepticism regarding the political feasibility of a PFL policy for Indiana—but the reasoning was different for the two groups.

From the public perspective, PFL is often thought of as a beneficial policy that leaders will nonetheless not create. Essentially, from this point of view, if PFL is not introduced to Indiana this will reflect failures of the political process—due to leaders who are uninterested in what the public wants or needs, or incapable of getting the job done.

*I don't know, we're just not really a state that's for the people, or helping the people...It's just surprising Indiana would take a step towards helping us, or having our back, if that makes sense... Yeah, we're always playing catch up...You take the states around us, you almost got to wait for the states around us, immediately around to us to all do it before we do it. You wait for our bordering states. It don't matter if California, or New York, or Florida, or any of them are doing it. Until Illinois, and Ohio, and everybody around us starts jumping on the bandwagon, Indiana doesn't.*

– White Liberal Woman 38 Indianapolis

*We've never really been a forward-thinking state. We're kind of in the background.*

– White Conservative Woman 59 Andrews

*Yes, but it'll never happen in Indiana ... It's a red state...I don't think folks would be against it on principle, I think the elected politicians would be against it. How often do our elected officials actually do what the public wants? ... It all depends on where the money's coming for them, not for their constituents.*

– White Liberal Man 48 Warsaw

*I think everybody would probably benefit, but it's not something that's ever going to happen ... What time is it in Indiana? It's about 1860 in a lot of ways. It's pretty backward in this state in some ways, especially with who's in charge now.*

– White Moderate Man 71 Fort Wayne

For Stakeholders, on the other hand, PFL can seem unlikely due to perceptions about what flies politically in the state, including among the public.

*I just see there being a lot of pushback in terms of—we're a 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps, deal with your own problems' kind of a state.*

– Female Stakeholder interview

*So I think the momentum is there [nationally], and I think for Indiana itself my guess is it's a little bit more conservative when it comes to requiring employment benefits. So honestly it would surprise me if they were one of the first states to do it, but I think there's enough momentum there that eventually it's going to be nationwide.*

– Male Stakeholder interview

In short, skepticism about the realistic chances of creating a PFL policy is great enough that the skepticism itself is likely to hurt the chances of adopting it.



## ZERO-SUM RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES

Discussions confirm that when there is resistance to the idea of PFL, it is often based on default assumptions about a zero-sum relationship between employers and employees, where anything that benefits the employee comes at a significant cost to the employer.

Within the zero-sum mentality, businesses are benevolent job creators who want to do the best they can for their employees, and if they do not offer paid family leave already it is because they cannot afford it. In short, any benefit for employees is a burden for employers.

*The pros for the employee would be the cons for the employer, and vice versa.*

*– White Nonpolitical Man 45 Marion*

Important facets of this zero-sum view include:

- An assumption that any increased cost (especially employee benefits) is likely to hurt a business's profits, and may even drive it out of business altogether;
- A focus on struggling businesses (that can't afford any additional costs)—as opposed to other, more profitable and powerful businesses; and
- An emphasis on profits, as a consideration more important than the needs of employees (which are only to be taken into account after solvency issues)

*A lot of people think it sounds great. It does—everybody should be able to [take time off to help their family]. But when it comes down to how it's paid for, how it's funded, in some cases employers would have to go out of business if they were mandated to offer something they couldn't afford to do. Not everybody is a largely successful operation. Some are kind of barely getting by... That's a concern for job creation because a lot of*

*businesses start with basically a wing and a prayer, and they aren't always crowd-funded or financially with enough capital invested in the first place. So they're really just getting started. I think it'll hurt job creation if you're requiring paid leave.*

*– Female Stakeholder Interview*

This kind of thinking, in which PFL is a burden, is especially pronounced when people focus on smaller businesses.

*I can see where a smaller family business obviously wouldn't be as apt to do it. I think the bigger companies would be able to... I think it would be harder for the business to be able to afford to pay you for being gone. I'm sure that most smaller businesses would be more apt to let you take time off without pay, but the paid part would be the struggle.*

*– White Conservative Man 25 Fort Wayne*

*I think it kind of depends, like if you're a small business you wouldn't necessarily have the funds to make all those—if you only have 2-3 employees and you're trying to survive and build and stuff, and you'd have to offer that too, then there's no way you could have employees. Then you'd have to hire someone else and you have twice the expense. So it kind of depends—maybe for bigger corporations? But I think it would actually kind of shrink people wanting to build businesses and stuff.*

*– White Nonpolitical Woman 38 Fort Wayne*

*I could certainly see a small business owner who can't afford such a policy.*

*– Female Stakeholder Interview*

Note that many of these objections might be off-target if Indiana follows the lead of all other states with PFL in creating an employee-funded insurance program, in which employees make small contributions from each paycheck. (See discussion of employee funding later in this report.)



## GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE

Related to zero-sum thinking is a focus on the primacy of business autonomy, and in particular, freedom from government intervention. From this perspective, government should steer clear of business in order to let business prosper, and any “interference,” such as mandates about PFL, should be minimized or avoided altogether. In short, there is sometimes an assumption that it is a mistake for the public (via government) to interfere with business, jobs, and the employer-employee relationship.

*Making it mandatory? There are too many people out there who say if you're going to make me do this I'm going to balk it as hard as I can, I'm only going to do the minimum that I have to ... Again, from a moral standpoint, is it the right thing to do? Yeah. Being forced to do it, in my opinion the government's forcing us to do too much that they shouldn't be telling us what to do on. It falls back on the company. If the government's going to force me to give you a week off because your mom's in the hospital, do I have to pay you for it?*

*- White Moderate Man 64 Kendallville*

*I feel like the idea in concept, but I don't think that it's the government's to tell an employer they have to do that. And I look at it like, if I wanted to start a business, and I don't agree with that idea, why should I have to? So it could discourage entrepreneurship.*

*- White Moderate Man 31 Kokomo*

*Obviously the challenges with that are that ultimately the employers are going to pay for that via some tax, and I think that's where the difficulty comes in—ensuring that there's some kind of equitable system for managing that. At this point I don't have a high degree of confidence in our state government to be able to figure out how to do that equitably. So I think right now I'd probably personally lean more towards it being an employer-funded option vs. a mandated or government option. I also think that provides employers an opportunity to be as competitive as they want to be in the marketplace, as they do for other benefits that potential employees are considering. So I think, all factors considered, at the moment I'd lean more towards an employer-funded approach vs. a government-funded approach.*

*- Female Stakeholder Interview*

*Mandating what companies do takes away freedoms and puts unnecessary burdens on the companies who are smaller.*

*- White Conservative Woman 32*

## PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY: EMPLOYEES AS CONSUMERS

Those who pushed back against the arguments for PFL sometimes framed the issue as one of employee responsibility. Good workers don't just perform well in the workplace, they also have to be responsible enough to ration their own time off and have enough money saved away in case an emergency hits.

*When you get a job, do you not get a job description with paid time off if you have it? Those things are laid out for you. If it's there it's there, and if it's not it's not. So you're the one taking a gamble on if that stuff happens—you take that risk. If I have to have the paid time off and I can't get it, and things do happen—that's the world we live in.*

*– White Conservative Man 24 Kendallville*

It is easy for people to default to the perspective that if some people are fortunate enough to have good work benefits, a living wage and a good work environment, it is because of their own efforts, abilities, choices and so forth.

When thinking within this personal responsibility perspective, people emphasized that employees should find a job that offers PFL if that is something they need. People are responsible for working hard and preparing themselves for the kinds of jobs they want, and it is on them to shop around for the kind of job and working conditions they desire.

*It's a perk—it has to all be included in your hiring.*

*That's something you should ask for yourself.*

*– White Nonpolitical Man 40 Fort Wayne*

*I went to school to put in the extra time, so I feel like it's okay that I'm compensated for that. Now, obviously not everybody in the whole world can be a nurse or wants to even go to school, so it just depends on what your motivating factors are. If you're very content and complacent where you are, then you might want to make sure you have either a nice savings account or something such as FMLA so you can maintain employment if something does happen.*

*– White Conservative Man 45 Auburn*

# COMPELLING MESSAGES



Research with stakeholders and the public established a particular set of messages that are most helpful for making the case for PFL.

## CORE MESSAGE: PFL IS GOOD FOR THE INDIANA ECONOMY

Making the strongest case that engages the broadest audience relies on messaging that highlights how PFL is *good for the economy*. More specifically:

### PAID FAMILY LEAVE WOULD BOOST THE INDIANA ECONOMY BY:

- Helping businesses hire and retain good workers,
- Improving employee morale and productivity, and
- Assuring that people stay employed and have money to spend.



Emphasizing the ways that PFL benefits businesses, which in turn can keep the economy strong, offers an idea that is both new and compelling. This perspective captures the broadest audience, in particular individuals who sympathize with business and may otherwise default to the zero-sum frame.

# COMPELLING MESSAGES

For people who are inclined by default to support PFL, its benefits for employees are obvious and implicit, while considering how PFL can be a benefit for *businesses and employers* is a new consideration that moves the idea from wishful thinking to practical policy. The idea of practical benefits to Indiana businesses creates “permission” that helps translate PFL from something appealing to individuals, to something that can be put into practice.

The following is just one illustration (similar to language successful in testing) of how to articulate the core theme.

## Sample Language

*More and more Hoosiers recognize that offering paid family leave to employees is a smart way to boost our state's economy. For one thing, it helps attract and keep good workers, which benefits both companies and Indiana's economy. It also means workers are confident that they won't lose pay when someone in the family gets sick and needs help, so they will still have money in their pockets to spend in local businesses. Studies have even shown that when employees can earn time off for family leave, they are less stressed and more productive at work. It's time to take this step to move the Indiana economy forward.*

(Note that various themes and details of this text are discussed throughout the section.)

Business stakeholders and members of the public who were concerned with the potential burden of PFL on business, agreed that emphasizing the positive impact PFL could have on individual businesses offered the strongest and most resonant message.

*I think tying in the economy and making an economic argument for it is important, because I think a lot of times leave—whether it's for taking care of a sick family member or a newborn or whatever it might be—it can be viewed as more of an emotional type of selfish or personal thing, and I think tying the economy to it makes it a little more professional and relates it to business and makes it a better argument... Talking about the funding makes it a better case, a stronger statement, than just, 'We should offer our employees that so they can have peace of mind.' I don't think that'll always sell. So I think tying that in is beneficial.*  
– Female Stakeholder Interview

# COMPELLING MESSAGES

## IMPORTANCE OF “MECHANISMS”

The particular “mechanisms” that explain how PFL helps businesses and the economy are very important elements in the narrative. The ones recommended here proved memorable and compelling in research, and help make the idea of business benefits more than an assertion. Topos research in a wide range of issue areas has established that when people understand how something works, they are more likely to believe and remember it, and to find it engaging and compelling.

Hoosiers easily understand and frequently repeat the idea that a benefit like PFL can help Indiana businesses hire and retain good workers.

Making the case that policies can ensure job sustainability or a boost in the economy—by making sure people can maintain the basic spending levels that keep the economy going—helps establish that PFL enhances the business climate. If people can’t spend on basics like food, repairs, making bill payments (especially on houses and cars), it becomes very clear to people that the economy hurts. It is easy to show that PFL sustains workers and their families, but for some that is not enough—they need to know that PFL can help individual businesses and understand that stronger individual businesses fortify the state economy.

*When you’re looking at a job, I think one of the things you look at is to see how much an employer puts into their workers and how much effort they put into what they’re offering their potential new hires or people who have been there for a while.*  
– Hispanic Liberal Woman 24 Fort Wayne

*I would think it would actually help, because more people would want jobs at those places, because they have that backed up in there... You’re going to go where you have the more safety nets and benefits, so they’re going to have more employees wanting to get jobs with them.*  
– White Moderate Woman 32 Evansville

*If they would put some kind of effort into actually caring for their employees, they might have a lower turnover rate.*

– Native American/Black Liberal Woman 62 Fort Wayne

*It would work for me. I’d feel better about the company. I’d work harder. I’d dig in deeper for them.*

– White Liberal Woman 68 Auburn

*Morale will also transfer into profitability and worker loyalty.*

– White Moderate Man 71 Fort Wayne

*A happy and healthy employee is a good employee. For us, you have to take your business seriously, but you also have to take the health and welfare of your employees seriously.*

– White Liberal Woman 52 Fort Wayne

*It could better the economy because they’re able to spend the same way that they did before, but whenever they have short times off or longer times off and they lose money, then it’s going to hurt the economy because they can’t spend as much as they used to.*

– White Liberal Man 27 Middletown

*When you lose a job it has a domino effect. It doesn’t just affect you and your family and your house. It affects the economy. It eventually hurts everybody.*

– White Moderate Man 49 Martinsville

*It sounded to me like it was saying that if you have these employers pay people when they take time off, it’s gonna help the economy because then they’re gonna have the same amount of money they were getting before, whereas now, they don’t get the paid time off. They’re not spending as much because they don’t have as much.*

– White Moderate Man 31 Kokomo

# COMPELLING MESSAGES

## BOTTOM LINE: ECONOMIC BENEFITS AS A POWERFUL FRAME

Overall, there are several reasons why the Economic Benefits frame is strong and compelling for audiences:

- It connects the dots to generate *new issue understanding*, which is often an aspect of effective communications approaches.
- It adds a “practical” side to what might otherwise be seen as a “merely” emotional or moral topic.
- It establishes a sense of shared stakes, effectively undercutting the zero-sum perspective.
- It creates an understanding of “*big-picture*” benefits—for the state and its economy—that makes a role for policy more natural. This is an area that doesn’t need to be left to individual employees and employers to negotiate, since it has economic implications for all of us.

## ALLUDING TO PFL AS A BASIC NEED

Importantly, because average Hoosiers recognize the importance of PFL for individuals and families, it is not necessary to dwell on this point, but is helpful to allude to it briefly in common-sense language while focusing the bulk of the attention on broader economic benefits.

### Sample Language

*Everybody recognizes that people sometimes need to be able to take time off to deal with family emergencies, without losing their jobs or being financially ruined.*



# COMPELLING MESSAGES

## MOMENTUM

Finally, while this concept was not specifically included in testing, Topos research experience in the past suggests that it will be helpful to suggest that there is already concrete and realistic momentum towards PFL in the state. The idea of social momentum in a particular direction can be powerfully motivating, and can make an otherwise abstract concept seem more real. In fact, this idea may be one of the most powerful missing pieces in current perceptions and discourse.

Given the widespread skepticism about whether Indiana would ever move forward with such a policy—and the “self-fulfilling prophecy” challenge inherent in this pattern—conveying the sense of momentum may be an important ingredient for creating a constructive conversation.

The Governor’s executive order in late 2017 offering PFL to state employees is a helpful talking point suggesting momentum toward a state policy for all employees. Indiana is the eighth state to provide PFL for state employees, suggesting that the state is more of a leader in this policy area than some insiders perceive. Half of the other states offering PFL also have state policy that covers employees in the private sector. Taking the step to a statewide policy has momentum in Indiana after adoption of the state employee benefit.

### Sample Language

*More and more Hoosiers recognize that offering paid family leave to employees is a smart way to boost our state’s economy.*

# POLICY-RELATED CONSIDERATIONS



In this section we consider a number of other aspects of the communications and policy challenge, based on conversations with Hoosiers. These include dimensions of the topic that need to be handled very carefully, as well as policy questions that might significantly affect perceptions of any proposed PFL plan.



# POLICY-RELATED CONSIDERATIONS

## GETTING THE JOB DONE AT SMALL BUSINESSES

One of the most common concerns about PFL among people who are generally supportive has to do with how small businesses—particularly very small businesses with, say, 10 or fewer employees—could handle this benefit. One consideration is financial (see discussions elsewhere in the report), but the other is that small operations could have trouble simply getting the job done if short an employee.

*I think it would be almost impossible for the small offices. Not financially, but I don't know how the small office could function without some of its employees. There's not someone like in a larger corporation who can step in and do my job. It's me or no one. I don't know how my boss could allow it. In a larger law firm you have people who can step in and take your place for six weeks. In mine, my clients know me and nobody else knows my job.*

- White Moderate Woman 55 Auburn

*If it was paid for by the employee, the only other objection they'd have would be that they lose the services of the employee for the time they're on leave and that they have to hire a temporary or another person and train them. So that's the downside to what you're proposing. The other side is—you may have to pay overtime for other employees in your workforce or do without that employee in your workforce, which can make it more difficult in that regard.*

- Female Stakeholder Interview

## EMPLOYEE FUNDING

Many of the objections to PFL start from the assumption that this benefit would be paid for by employers, and would come directly out of their bottom line.

While there is no clarity yet regarding the shape an ultimate policy might take, it is clear from research that the idea of funding PFL (largely) through employee contributions would make a big difference in the discussion.

The idea is easy to express in understandable ways. For example:

### Sample Language

*Paid family leave puts very little burden on business, particularly if it is funded mainly through employee contributions of a few dollars a week.*

Mentioning employer-employee cost-sharing garnered strong support from a broad cross-section of Hoosiers. First, because it would alleviate the perceived financial toll on businesses, especially small businesses. Second, it gives employees a stake in the system and would make them more invested in PFL, and in seeing that it works properly.

# POLICY-RELATED CONSIDERATIONS

*I think employers and employees should both share the cost. I think you have to have the business owner or the CEO buying in, but I think the family's got to take some part of the burden too. But you have to pay them enough too that they can afford to do that.*

*- White Conservative Man 56 Auburn*

*Even if you're not paying completely what the employee would make if they were working—but if you at least pay a portion of that, that's still 50/50 basically. You do good for the employee and also the employer.*

*- Hispanic Liberal Woman 24 Fort Wayne*

*What I like about that idea [employee-employer funding] is the fact that if I give you something for free it has no value. You didn't work for it, you didn't earn it, you didn't contribute to it—it's meaningless to some people. Even though it's a big chunk of gold, here you go, it's yours—you didn't pay for it or work for it. So the value of what you're talking about is crucial. They're not going to have value if they don't put something into it.*

*- White Nonpolitical Man 45 Marion*

On the other hand, there are also potential pitfalls when it comes to highlighting employee funding. One is the assumption that funds would be company-specific, making it difficult for small companies to cover costs.

*If it's a small company and they only have five employees, they can't contribute. But if it's a large company, yeah, but then that smaller company should offer maybe kind of like a 401K. If you put in \$10, we'll give you back 2% or something. You can have a cushion, and it would be like a rainy day fund. But you couldn't just take it out because you wanted to go to Jamaica or something.*

*- White Liberal Woman 55 Fort Wayne*

Another objection heard from a number of respondents in the public sample is that further deductions from employee paychecks would be unwelcome.

*Sounds like a subtle tax, everybody chip in. It just sounds like it's another way to tax people without calling it a tax.*

*- White Very Conservative Woman 65 Bloomington*

*I'm sure some employees wouldn't necessarily like that because it's coming out of their paychecks.*

*- White Conservative Man 25 Fort Wayne*

The bottom line is that this aspect of the policy needs careful consideration. Both Stakeholders and average Hoosiers tend to like the idea of employee contributions, but this idea makes most sense in the context of a statewide pool, and when employee contributions are modest and not understood as a “tax.”

# POLICY-RELATED CONSIDERATIONS

## “UNIVERSAL”?

One of the most challenging sticking points in the conversations for the research had to do with whether PFL ought to be a universal requirement, or an optional benefit offered by some employers.

For average Hoosiers who tend to support the program, that is often the natural assumption—the conversation is about a new (and appealing) work standard for all employers, many of whom would be unlikely to offer it if the choice were left up to them.

Nonetheless, members of the public often do have concerns about the idea of government “interference,” as previously discussed, and in order to avoid triggering these, the language that was successful in testing did not use terms like “mandate” or “universal.” Instead, the idea of a universal benefit was simply left implicit—or less loaded terms such as “statewide” or “all workers” were used.

For stakeholders more accustomed to thinking about the possible variants of policy, the idea of a “voluntary” program was often germane, and certain stakeholders were especially adamant that anything other than an entirely voluntary system would be a slippery slope to a government-mandated program that would slow business growth and dampen the state’s business climate.

*The concern I have is once something is enacted, then it tends to—the next step is they want to increase the level of participation of the employer into the program.*

*Before you know it, it’s mandatory paid leave.*

*– Female Stakeholder Interview*

*We’re very much of the mindset that employers should determine what their labor and employment policies should be, given the confines of current law. So should they decide they want to have voluntary, or if they want to provide that benefit to their employees, they should. If they want to make it so the employees pay vs. the employers, that’s the employer’s prerogative.*

*– Female Stakeholder Interview*

The recommended communications approach is effective, in part, because it helps inoculate against questions and objections related to universal mandates—particularly among the public. (See further discussion of the difference between public and insider audiences later in the report.)

# POLICY-RELATED CONSIDERATIONS

## QUESTIONING THE DETAILS

One of the most common patterns in conversations with the general public and stakeholders alike is that people asked about more details of implementation and what PFL in Indiana would look like.

*I would like to know what states have adopted this and what the details are pertaining to it. I would also like to know what companies have given their input in this.*

*– White Liberal Woman 33*

*I would need to see all the facts and details to make a decision on [whether PFL would hurt our state].*

*– White Conservative Woman 51*

On one hand, this was often good news—it indicated engagement with the topic and underscored the general public’s eagerness to understand how they might be able to gain access to PFL.

On the other hand, non-supporters sometimes seemed to be interested in details so that they could identify objections or weaknesses.

The bottom line from our perspective is that communicators should:

- Focus on and come back to the core recommended messages, rather than getting caught up in details (“the weeds”), BUT
- Be prepared to clarify the policy further, in straightforward, user-friendly language, once it is time to have a more concrete conversation (e.g. how the “pool” of funds would work, how much employee contributions would be, what would count as a family emergency, who would make that decision, which employers would fall under the policy, how much time people would have off, how much pay they would get, and how they would qualify for the benefit).



# INSIDER AUDIENCES



While a successful communications approach typically involves a consistent set of themes across audiences, there are also nuances that can make an important difference.

Communicators should keep in mind important differences between addressing public and insider (stakeholder) audiences about paid family leave. Most of the following dynamics have been mentioned earlier in the report, but it is worth reviewing them here.



# INSIDER AUDIENCES

## SKEPTICISM ABOUT WHETHER IT WOULD BE SUPPORTED

In interviews, even stakeholders who personally support PFL expressed doubt that other businesspeople or policymakers—or even a majority of the general public—would agree with them. While PFL is viewed as a common-sense policy by much of the public, among stakeholders there is a mix of support and apprehension, based both on practical concerns (costs to businesses, and so forth) and skepticism about whether the political climate could allow for creation of this kind of policy.

*I would think it would all come down to the short-term cost. Long-term, your employee satisfaction and rate of illness and stress and anger and burnout should all be better. I would think employers would give pushback.*

– Female Stakeholder Interview

*I don't think Indiana is going to be a leader necessarily in it. But I hope we can maybe catch up or try.*

– Female Stakeholder Interview

For this reason, it would probably be important, when communicating with leaders, to share compelling data regarding public support for a PFL plan.

## INTEREST IN CASE STUDIES

While the Indiana public is not particularly engaged by discussions of successful PFL policies in other states—and even stakeholders can doubt their political relevance—there certainly is a strong interest among many leaders in hearing about the details of how policies elsewhere have worked: details of the policies, evidence of success, and so forth.

*The states that are moving toward what you'd consider more employee-friendly rules, like paid sick leave, paid family leave, disability, minimum wage, it'll be interesting to see if businesses leave those states for other states, or if businesses find that these laws are actually helping them recruit better people, so people who want higher-paying jobs and more benefits are going to these states. It'll be interesting to see how that dynamic works.*

– Male Stakeholder interview

*I would just be interested in knowing some of the data collected from other states that have implemented a family leave policy. Like what's their employment retention rate, and what are their business leaders saying about how it impacts their bottom line.*

– Female Stakeholder interview

Essentially, the research suggests that communicators should gather compelling information about PFL case studies from other locations, and at a minimum have this material “in their back pocket” for discussions with insider audiences—and should even emphasize these successes as part of the overall communications strategy with this group.

## BIG-PICTURE VIEW OF STATE'S ECONOMY

Stakeholders, in particular, were interested in such topics as recruiting and attracting talent to Indiana as an important component of their support for PFL. Much more than the public, they tend to focus on the state's overall business climate and employers in the aggregate. The idea of creating a level playing field for all the state's businesses also fits into this pattern.

*So I'm a firm believer that in order to attract and retain the best talent, we have to become more progressive on these topics. I believe that the late generation X-ers and the millennials want a different lifestyle balance than was popular when many baby boomers were in the height of their careers in the '80s and '90s and early 2000s. So I personally believe that we'll have better and more committed talent if we make better investments in family leave. I also think that it's necessary for us to be competitive on a global basis.*

*- Female Stakeholder Interview*

*I'm a millennial so I see so many of my colleagues who make employment decisions less based on salary and more based on certain types of benefits that are afforded—flexibility with their schedules, and family medical leave is another one of those things that I see a lot of these larger companies offering some of my peers. So I think it's something that some companies use now to differentiate themselves with competitors or other industries just so they can attract talent.*

*- Male Stakeholder Interview*

*Most employers probably aren't in the position where they feel like they need to provide paid family leave unless they're in an industry that their competitors are providing it, so in order to remain competitive they're providing it, such as the IT world—they're really starting to ramp up on that. So I think because of that, there probably has to be some type of government program to get the ball rolling.*

*- Male Stakeholder Interview*

# MESSAGING THAT MISSES THE MARK



To better appreciate how and why particular communications approaches are effective, it is helpful to consider how and why others are not.

The approaches discussed in this section were less than effective when treated as the central, organizing focus of communications. This does not mean that these ideas or terms should never be mentioned, but only that when treated as the main, initial focus, they are less successful than the recommended approach when it comes to engaging interest, overcoming barriers, and so forth.



# MESSAGING THAT MISSES THE MARK

## FAMILY VALUES

Leading with the idea of “family values” proved unhelpful for several reasons. It promoted a focus on families more than on aspects of paid family leave. It failed to add any particularly new perspectives to the conversation. And importantly, it was perceived as a divisive phrase by a number of research participants.

### Sample Language

*“Family values” means solutions that actually make life better for families, and we all have a good idea of what that means. Putting family values into practice would mean that an employer wouldn’t be able to fire someone just because they, or their kid, or an elderly relative got sick. Supporting family values means thinking about what actually allows working families to make ends meet.*

*So many people have used the phrase ‘supporting family values’ as a way to actively remove rights and the expression of life for a lot of groups of people, whether by sexuality or religion or gender, socio-economic class, all sorts of things. So I agree fundamentally that it would be good if there were policies in place that did support the material well-being of a family. But a term as vague as ‘family values’ is a slippery, dangerous term that can be used for nefarious ends.*

*– White Liberal Man 25 Fort Wayne*

*I think from my neck of the woods, family values has a certain connotation, and it’s not always seen as a popular one with people around the rest of the state. So when you start talking about family values and ‘real families,’ that perks people’s ears up, and not necessarily in a positive way. The message is good, that family values means a lot more than—it means different things to different people. But therein lies the problem, because family values means certain things to certain people.*

*– Male Stakeholder Interview*

# MESSAGING THAT MISSES THE MARK

## SOMETHING WE ALL NEED

Some tested messages focused on the ways that PFL benefits families and individuals—e.g. by emphasizing the universality of the need to help family members. This approach reflects the default feelings of many Hoosiers, and therefore was widely agreed with. However, by itself, it adds little to the conversation and does not address concerns about business viability. For this reason, the idea of a basic, universal need should definitely be mentioned, but should be embedded in a discussion of how PFL yields broader economic benefits.

### Sample Language

*Everybody recognizes that people sometimes need to be able to take time off to deal with family emergencies, without losing their jobs or being financially ruined. All workers in Indiana should be eligible for some paid family leave. This simple benefit can be critically important for individuals and families, and puts very little burden on business.*

*I think that business owners are the ones providing jobs and should be the decision makers for pay and benefits, including how much they want to involve employees in decision-making. If an employee doesn't like the rules, get another job!*  
– White Conservative Woman 74

## HIGH VS. LOW WORKERS

One of the tested approaches focused on the fact that some workers (in higher level positions) receive the benefit while others do not.

### Sample Language

*While professionals in higher paying jobs often get generous benefits and workplace flexibility, lower- and middle-income workers usually don't have the option of taking leave to care for a family member without losing pay. If they are lucky, they have an employer who offers paid sick days and paid family leave. But if they aren't lucky, it's all on them to work it out if they or their kids get sick or they need to care for an elderly parent or a newborn. These basic standards shouldn't be left up to luck. There should be a fair and level playing field for everyone, and workers should have a basic set of protections like earned time off to take care of important family needs.*

While many Hoosiers agree that this situation is unfair, and point out that lower status workers can least afford to get by without access to PFL, this approach allowed others to default to an individual responsibility frame and to insist that it's nobody's business what benefits employers offer their employees. It is easy for people to conclude that workers in jobs that pay less have not made good life choices. Furthermore, this messaging fails to address the essential question of PFL's relationship to businesses and the economy.



# MESSAGING THAT MISSES THE MARK

*I'm a nurse. Before that I was a CNA, and before that I was a factory worker. I earn more PTO now as a nurse than I did as a CNA and as a factory worker. I guess in the sense of effort put into my job, I went to school to put in the extra time, so I feel like it's okay that I'm compensated for that. Now, obviously not everybody in the whole world can be a nurse or wants to even go to school, so it just depends on what your motivating factors are. If you're very content and complacent where you are, then you might want to make sure you have either a nice savings account or something such as FMLA so you can maintain employment if something does happen.*

*– White Conservative Man 45 Auburn*

*Well, I don't disagree with that, especially the beginning part where you said the people with the higher incomes—this is less likely to be a problem for them than the people in the lower-paying jobs. And I understand that that's a hardship when someone in a low-paying job, particularly if they're the head of the household or something, have children, don't earn much, but the people who are in those higher-paying jobs a lot of times have worked very, very hard to get to be in those positions. So it's kind of like any other social programs, I think. You're going to have a lot of people who are going to try to get whatever they can for nothing, or will try to abuse the system as much as they can, and there will be others that will try to do everything on their own as much as they can. So it's important to have organizations for people who really need the help, but sometimes things are hard to monitor of who really needs the help and who has just figured out a way to get paid while not working. Unfortunately, there are people out there that do that, so that makes it bad for the people who truly have a need.*

*– Female Stakeholder Interview*

## PROVEN TO WORK ELSEWHERE

A focus on successful PFL programs in other states did little to get average Hoosiers engaged, or to promote the notion that Indiana should or could have a program like those other states.

### Sample Language

*There are some great examples of solutions that work in other states that have adopted them. For example, in one state, companies have offered paid parental leave for the past decade, and nine out of ten employers say it has had no effect or a positive effect on the company—in terms of productivity, profitability, turnover and morale. Other family leave policies have also led to win-win results. It's time to make earned family leave standard statewide.*

First, it is easy to dismiss the states with existing programs as liberal, coastal elite states who have little in common with Indiana or Hoosiers. Second, resonating with the political skepticism about Indiana, many people dismissed the idea that something like PFL could become a reality in Indiana until states like Ohio or Illinois have it, because Indiana is a follower rather than a leader.

*My impression is that lawmakers here don't care what people in California are doing, or Rhode Island, because those are the liberals and we're not them. They don't want to hear what liberal California is doing because we do it differently.*

*– Female Stakeholder Interview*

Overall, we believe that references to successful programs elsewhere can be helpful as supplemental, follow-up information once a constructive conversation is established and the focus turns to the particulars of policy—but that references to these other programs is not a helpful leading focus, particularly for the general public.

# MESSAGING THAT MISSES THE MARK

## GOOD FOR INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYERS

There is an important difference between a big-picture focus on the state's economy and a narrower focus on individual benefits. Some tested messaging focused on the latter.

### Sample Language

*In one state where employers have offered paid family leave for years, nine out of ten companies say it has positive effects—in terms of the productivity of less-stressed employees, as well as making it easier to hire and keep good workers.*

Unfortunately, this framing can invite the conclusion that individual businesses should choose what's best for them.

*Then the employers should look at that. They should be the ones researching that, and if they want to do that, if that's the kind of employees they want to have, then they should be looking at that—researching it and seeing if that's what's really giving the morale and stuff.*

*– White Conservative Man 24 Kendallville*

For this reason, it is more effective to reinforce a focus on the state as a whole.

## COUNTERING OBJECTIONS

Some tested messaging focused on the idea that objections to PFL are off-base.

### Sample Language

*We all have times when we need to be able to take a bit of time off to deal with family emergencies, without losing our jobs or being financially ruined. And it turns out that the arguments against paid family leave are very weak. While some say it's a cost businesses can't afford, the truth is it's a benefit that can actually help businesses, by boosting employee morale, making workers more productive, and making it easier to hire and keep employees. Not to mention that the plan is partly funded by employee contributions. The other objection, that people will cheat the system, hasn't happened much in other states, and isn't a good reason to not offer this common sense flexibility to people who truly need it.*

This messaging is weaker than the recommended approach, probably because it is essentially defensive, rather than offering a positive case for the policy. It also means explicitly bringing up opposing arguments, which can often end up reinforcing them.

# CONCLUSION



A number of considerations will determine whether the state of Indiana ultimately considers or enacts Paid Family Leave, including ongoing political, economic and other factors.

Research with the public and stakeholders, though, makes it clear that there is a significant pool of support in the state to tap into, and that skepticism about the political feasibility of the policy may be one of the most significant obstacles to moving forward.



Many Hoosiers believe the policy can be good for both them and the state as a whole, but doubt that leaders have the will to push forward with this beneficial policy. If advocates do elect to promote the policy, they can be most successful by building on the widely shared belief that PFL addresses a basic and universal need, by emphasizing ways in which the policy can benefit the state economy, and by creating a sense that there is forward momentum that can make this requirement a realistic possibility going forward.

# APPENDIX: RESEARCH MATERIALS

## SAMPLE ETHNOGRAPHY QUESTIONS

Note that by its nature, ethnographic research does not follow a set script, but the following is a pool of possible starter questions to direct conversation in relevant directions.

### Introductory

What comes to mind when you think about people needing to take time off to take care of family members [such as a new child or an elderly parent]? What thoughts or feelings?

Have you heard of paid family leave?

[If no] It's basically the idea that employees would earn the right to have some days off to deal with family emergencies, without losing their jobs or losing pay.

*Federal law already provides for UNPAID time off for many employees, but not all. Employees are eligible to take Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) if they have worked for at least 1,250 hours over the previous 12 months, and work at a location where at least 50 employees are employed by the employer within 75 miles.*

[If yes] Do you think it's a good idea for employers to provide paid family leave to employees in Indiana?

### Universal vs. Voluntary

What do you think about having paid family leave be voluntary? Where employers can chose if they offer it and they can chose what kind of employees have it [this is the current situation].

What do you think about having paid family leave be universal, so that all employees could have access to it if they needed it?

Is there anyone who benefits and is there anyone who loses out when it's completely voluntary? What if it's universal, who benefits and who, if anyone, loses out?

### Common need/experience

While professionals in higher paying jobs often get generous benefits and workplace flexibility, lower- and middle-income workers usually don't have the option of taking leave to care for a family member and get paid. What do you think about that?

What would you say to someone who said we shouldn't offer paid family leave to everyone because someone might figure out a way to game the system/take time off when they didn't really need it?

What do you think about the idea that supporting family values means thinking about what actually allows working families to make ends meet, and putting family values into practice would mean that an employer wouldn't be able to fire someone just because they, or their kid, or an elderly relative got sick?

# APPENDIX: RESEARCH MATERIALS

## Beneficial for workers and the economy

Some people are saying that offering paid family leave is beneficial because it's a proven way to attract and keep workers, which is good for companies and good for Indiana's economy. What do you think about that?

There are some states and counties that have universal paid family leave with a lot of success. Nine out of ten employers say it has had a positive effect or no effect on the company—in terms of productivity, profitability, turnover and morale. Do you think it could be the same in Indiana?

Small business owners cite lack of sales as the greatest obstacle to success. As many employers say, "Your workers are my customers. I need them not to lose a job or paycheck when they're sick so they can come to my shop."

What would you say to someone who said that it's not a good idea to interfere with how businesses do things? Should we keep our hands off, since they spend money and hire people?

Some people think we don't need to make businesses do this, there's already enough requirements or regulations. What's your reaction to that?

If we have employers offer paid family leave, what if it adds costs that businesses could decide to pass on to consumers? Or that it could mean profits are not as big? Should that make a difference?

Studies have shown that when employees can earn time off for family leave, they are more productive at work, and it's easier to hire and keep employees. But some businesses say that if they offer those benefits then salaries might stay the same or go down because of costs. What's your take?

What about the idea that paid family leave can improve performance, by reducing stress in employees' lives because they don't have to worry about losing their jobs if they need time off or worrying about finances if someone is sick. What do you think about that?

Can I read you something and get your opinion?

TEXT

# APPENDIX: RESEARCH MATERIALS

## SAMPLE STAKEHOLDER TELEPHONE INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Thank you very much for your time today! Please know that all comments are confidential and will be aggregated. I would like to record the conversation, just in case I miss something, and so I don't get something wrong.

Have you heard about the concept of paid family leave?

[If yes] What do you think about the idea of paid family leave in Indiana?

[If no] It's basically the idea that employees would earn the right to have some days off to care for a sick family member or be with a new child, without losing their jobs or losing pay.

*If necessary, remind them that federal law already provides for UNPAID time off for many employees, but not all.*

*Employees are eligible to take Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) if they have worked for at least 1,250 hours over the previous 12 months, and work at a location where at least 50 employees are employed by the employer within 75 miles.*

What public discussions have you heard about the issue, if any?

I'd like to read you two texts about the topic and get your reactions to them.

TEXT

What comes to mind when you hear that? (follow up)

TEXT

What comes to mind when you hear that? (follow up)

Most people have said they'd like to see other details about how PFL would work—if you have any questions about that, what are the first ones that come to mind?

If you had to go out and publicly make the case for PFL, what would you say—what argument would you emphasize?

How do you picture the context being in Indiana as compared to other places? How might views be different here?

Thank you very much for your time and thoughtfulness!



# APPENDIX: RESEARCH MATERIALS

## SAMPLE TELEPHONE MINI-GROUP PROTOCOL

Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in this research.  
The conversation should take about 30 minutes.

*Assure them the conversation is open-ended, with no right or wrong answers, just how they feel and think about things.*

I'll be recording the conversation for research purposes, but your name is not associated with the research in any way. Your participation is treated as confidential. Is that OK? [Start recording]

First let me write down everyone's first name, and what state you're calling from.

The first thing I would like to do is read you a paragraph, and then ask some questions. [read twice]

TEXT

1. If you were going to tell a friend what the basic point of this paragraph is, what would you say—we're trying to see if the ideas are clear. [rotate through all participants]
2. How do you think this issue might be important for people? [rotate through all participants, on this and subsequent questions]

Great, now I'd like to read you a second paragraph: [read twice]

TEXT

3. How would you describe the main point of that paragraph?
4. Without getting too personal, can you tell me if this third paragraph gives you any thoughts about your own situation, or someone you know? [Probe]

OK, now I'd like to read you one last paragraph.

TEXT

5. What would you say is the key idea there?
6. What if someone said "Putting more requirements like this on our employers would actually hurt our state"—how would you reply?
7. From this conversation, and the paragraphs I read you, what strikes you as the most important point? (Why?)
8. Did you hear anything in the paragraphs I read that you would disagree with or are hesitant about? [If yes, probe]

Thank you very much for your time and thoughtfulness!

# APPENDIX: RESEARCH MATERIALS

## SAMPLE TALKBACK QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for taking part in this survey.

Because you are being compensated for your time we do ask that you give thorough, thoughtful and honest answers. Please answer each question with at least one or two full sentences.

If you do not think you can do that at this at this time, please exit the survey now.

Please read the following statement carefully, because you'll be asked several questions about it.

TEXT

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1. Without going back to read the statement again, what do you remember of the main ideas? Please write at least two sentences in your own words as if you were sharing these ideas with a friend.
2. If you had the chance to ask an expert, what would you like clarified about the ideas you read about in the paragraph?
3. If you were explaining to a friend the key idea in the statement, what would you say?
4. Suppose you were having a discussion with a friend or relative who said, "Putting more requirements on employers will only hurt our state." How would you respond?

We only have two more multiple-choice questions for you in this survey. So take a moment to read them carefully.

5. Please rank the following statements in order of how much they reflect your views. Please rate them from 1st (most agree) to 4th (least agree).

Workers should receive some paid time off to deal with family emergencies.

It's nobody else's business what kinds of benefits employers and employees agree on.

A universal requirement for paid family leave would be better than a voluntary system employers could join.

It should be entirely up to employers whether they offer any given benefit.

Why did you order them the way you did?

6. Please rank the following statements in order of how much they reflect your views. Please rate them from 1st (most agree) to 4th (least agree).

It would be good for Indiana if employers provided paid family leave.

Asking employers to do more is bad for business and the economy.

Most people who take family leave genuinely need it.

Paid family leave would probably lead to lots of fraud and abuse.

Why did you order them the way you did?

# APPENDIX: RESEARCH MATERIALS

## TESTED TEXTS

Note that titles are for internal convenience and were not seen/heard by research participants.

### Benefits employer

Why would an employer want to offer paid time off for employees to deal with family needs? One reason is that it's a proven way to attract and keep workers. Studies have shown that when employees can earn time off for family leave, it is easier to recruit them and keep them. Another is that it can improve productivity, by reducing stress in employees' lives. Studies in places where many or all employers offer paid family leave show that employers end up feeling it is a net positive for their companies.

### Higher vs. lower workers

While professionals in higher paying jobs often get generous benefits and workplace flexibility, lower- and middle-income workers usually don't have the option of taking leave to care for a family member without losing pay. If they are lucky, they have an employer who offers paid sick days and paid family leave. But if they aren't lucky, it's all on them to work it out if they or their kids get sick or they need to care for an elderly parent or a newborn. These basic standards shouldn't be left up to luck. There should be a fair and level playing field for everyone, and workers should have a basic set of protections like earned time off to take care of important family needs.

### Proven to work

There are lots of concrete, practical ways to make working people's lives better while not hurting the businesses they work for. There are some great examples of solutions that work in other states that have adopted them. For example, in one state, companies have offered paid parental leave for the past decade, and nine out of ten employers say it has had no effect or a positive effect on the company—in terms of productivity, profitability, turnover and morale. Other family leave policies have also led to win-win results. It's time to make earned family leave standard statewide.

### Family values

"Family values" means solutions that actually make life better for families, and we all have a good idea of what that means. Putting family values into practice would mean that an employer wouldn't be able to fire someone just because they, or their kid, or an elderly relative got sick. Supporting family values means thinking about what actually allows working families to make ends meet.

### We all need it (short)

Everybody recognizes that people sometimes need to be able to take time off to deal with family emergencies, without losing their jobs or being financially ruined. All workers in Indiana should be eligible for some paid family leave. This simple benefit can be critically important for individuals and families, and puts very little burden on business, particularly if it is funded through employee contributions.

### We all need it (long)

Everybody recognizes that people sometimes need to be able to take time off to deal with family emergencies, without losing their jobs or being financially ruined. The question is how to achieve this, and one main question is whether to make paid family leave voluntary or universal. Making it a requirement for everyone works better because it creates a fair playing field where companies can't profit by not offering the benefit, and as with insurance, the program is only self-sustaining if you have a large pool of people each contributing a small amount. There are other details we also have to get right, like how much income to replace and whether the funding should be shared by employer and employees or fully employee funded—but the main point is that a universal program for everyone is the only way to really make the benefit work.

# APPENDIX: RESEARCH MATERIALS

## State economy

Offering paid family leave to employees is a proven way to boost our state's economy. For one thing, it helps attract and keep good workers, which benefits both companies and Indiana's economy. It also means workers are confident that they won't lose pay when someone in the family gets sick and needs help, so they will still have money in their pockets to spend in local businesses. Studies have even shown that when employees can earn time off for family leave, they are less stressed and more productive at work. It's time to take this step to move the Indiana economy forward.

## State Economy 2

Offering paid family leave to employees is a proven way to boost the economy for everyone. For one thing, it helps attract and keep good workers, which benefits both companies and Indiana's economy. It also means workers will spend more money in the local economy, because they're confident that they won't lose pay when someone in the family gets sick and needs help. Studies have even shown that when employees can earn time off for family leave, they are less stressed and more productive at work. It's time to take this step to move the Indiana economy forward, as they have in other states.

## State Economy 3

Offering paid family leave to employees is a proven way to boost the economy for everyone. For one thing, it helps attract and keep good workers, which benefits both companies and Indiana's economy. It also means workers will spend more money in the local economy, because they're confident that they won't lose pay when someone in the family gets sick and needs help. Studies have even shown that when employees can earn time off for family leave, they are less stressed and more productive at work. And the burden on businesses is small, since paid family leave works like insurance, mainly funded by contributions of a few dollars a week per employee. It's time to take this step to move the Indiana economy forward, as they have in other states.

## Good For Both

We all have times when we need to be able to take a bit of time off to deal with family emergencies, without losing our jobs or being financially ruined. And it turns out that offering paid family leave is also good for businesses overall. In one state where employers have offered paid family leave for years, nine out of ten companies say it has positive effects—in terms of the productivity of less-stressed employees, as well as making it easier to hire and keep good workers. It's time for Indiana to make paid family leave a requirement for employers.

## Objections weak

We all have times when we need to be able to take a bit of time off to deal with family emergencies, without losing our jobs or being financially ruined. And it turns out that the arguments against paid family leave are very weak. While some say it's a cost businesses can't afford, the truth is it's a benefit that can actually help businesses, by boosting employee morale, making workers more productive, and making it easier to hire and keep employees. Not to mention that the plan is partly funded by employee contributions. The other objection, that people will cheat the system, hasn't happened much in other states, and isn't a good reason to not offer this common sense flexibility to people who truly need it.

## Affects All

Paid family medical leave is designed to protect people from losing income when they are sick, or to care for a family member, or take care of a new baby, and so on. When people lose paychecks in order to care for themselves or family members, it not only hurts families, it also slows down spending, and ends up affecting all of us. We should look at all job standards to make sure that jobs boost rather than bust the economy.

# APPENDIX: RESEARCH MATERIALS

## Employee Contributions

We all have times when we need to be able to take a bit of time off to deal with family emergencies, without losing our jobs or being financially ruined. The best idea is to make paid family leave a universal requirement for employers, because it's funded largely by employee contributions, so the larger the pool, the less everyone has to chip in.

## Employee Contributions 2

We all have times when we need to be able to take a bit of time off to deal with family emergencies, without losing our jobs or being financially ruined. The best idea is to make paid family leave a universal benefit offered by all employers. This is because paid family leave would work like insurance, funded mainly by employee contributions, so the larger the pool, the less everyone has to chip in.

## Employee Contributions 3

We all have times when we need to be able to take a bit of time off to deal with family emergencies, without losing our jobs or being financially ruined. The best idea is to make paid family leave a state-wide benefit offered by all employers. This is because paid family leave would work like insurance, funded mainly by employee contributions, so the larger the pool, the less everyone has to chip in.

## Economy & Contributions

Offering paid family leave to employees is a proven way to boost Indiana's economy. For one thing, it helps attract and keep good workers, which benefits both companies and Indiana's economy. It also means workers will spend more money in the local economy, because they're confident that they won't lose pay when someone in the family gets sick and needs help. Studies have even shown that when employees can earn time off for family leave, they are less stressed and more productive at work. And the burden on businesses is small, since paid family leave works like insurance, mainly funded by contributions of a few dollars a week per employee.

# ABOUT TOPOS



Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately *transform the landscape of public understanding* where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is possible to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, *real change* depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support.

For more information:  
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