

Leave from Work for Survivors of Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, or Stalking



This publication explains your right in Washington State to take time off from work to address domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking. This is sometimes called “safe leave.”

What Is Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, and Stalking?

Domestic violence is a pattern of physically and/or emotionally abusive behavior used to control another person with whom the abusive person has an intimate or family relationship. The court’s definition of domestic violence is similar.

Under Washington law, domestic violence exists when a person:

- Hits you, assaults you, or harms you physically in any way, or
- Causes you to fear immediate physical harm, assault, or injury. (For example, restraining your freedom of movement, stalking you, destroying your property, or making verbal threats.)

The person causing the harm or threatening you must be:

- A family member;
- Someone you live with or have lived with in the past;
- Someone you are dating or have dated, or;
- The other parent of your child.

Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual contact, including unwanted sexual touching, molestation, rape, or attempted rape. Consent to sexual contact is limited to that specific act at that time only.

Stalking is any intentional incident of threatening, harassing, following, surveillance, or coercive behavior that occurs more than once and causes you to fear for your safety, the safety of someone you know, or your property.

No one has the right to threaten or hurt you.

No one has the right to sexual contact from you.

If you are a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking, you can find support and resources near you by contacting the Washington State Domestic Violence Hotline (see Resources).

For What Reasons I Can Use This Leave?

There are many things that survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking may need to do to recover from abuse and get safe. For example, you can take time off from work to:

- File a police report about the domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking;
- Participate in civil or criminal court proceedings related to the domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking, like getting a protection order or divorce or testifying in a criminal trial;
- Get medical treatment, including mental health counseling;
- Work with an advocacy program, such as a domestic violence program or a rape crisis center;
- Move to a domestic violence shelter;
- Take other actions you may need to take to protect your safety; and
- Help a family member with any or all of these things.

Who Can Take This Leave?

Any employee who is a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking may take time off from work to address the violence. Also, an employee whose child, spouse, intimate partner, parent, grandparent, or parent-in-law has been a victim may use this leave to help that family member address the domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

Can Part-Time or Seasonal Employees Take This Leave?

Yes.

Do All Employers Have to Follow This Law?

Yes. All employers in Washington, regardless of their size, must give this leave to their employees. Both public and private employers have to follow this law.

Does My Employer Have to Pay Me During My Leave?

As of 2018, Washington employers of all sizes must provide paid sick and safe leave to most of their employees. (Employees not covered by this leave law are those who are not covered by the Minimum Wage Act, such as salaried managers and certain professionals like doctors and lawyers.) Seattle and Tacoma also have their own paid leave laws. If you work in Seattle or Tacoma, you will be covered by whichever law is most generous to you – state or city.

To learn more about how much the leave laws cover, see the information on the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries website, listed in the Resources section below.

Can I Be Fired or Demoted for Taking This Leave?

The vast majority of employers cannot fire or demote you for taking this leave. The only employers that do not have to give you your job back are temporary staffing agencies that had assigned you to a temporary job. All other employers must give you your job back, at the same level of pay and benefits that you had when you took the leave, or give you an equivalent position.

How Many Days Can I Take off Work?

The law says you may take reasonable leave. This means you may take as much time as you need to address the domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking. Sometimes this may be only a day or an afternoon. Sometimes this may be several days.

Do I Have to Take the Leave All at Once?

No. You can take occasional days off rather than use your leave all at once, if that is necessary to address the domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking. For example, you may take a day off to testify in court, and then be told that the court has continued the hearing to another day. This law allows you to take another day off when you need to.

Do I Have to Tell My Employer Before I Take the Leave?

Yes, unless you need to take leave immediately because of an emergency. If it is not an emergency, you have to tell your employer in advance. Employers have the right to set their own notice policy. Your employer should tell you how many days' notice he or she expects before you can take this leave. If an employer does not have a policy, then you have to give notice some time before you take leave. If you need to take leave for an emergency, you must tell your employer on the first day you leave work. If you cannot tell your employer yourself, you can have someone else tell them on your behalf. It is a good idea to give your employer as much notice as possible.

Do I Have to Prove to My Employer That I Need This Leave?

If you are taking three or more days off in a row, your employer can require proof that you need this leave time. To do so, you can share with your employer one of the following:

- Your written statement;
- A police report;
- A court order, such as an order for protection or a criminal no-contact order, or some kind of court document showing that you or your family member appeared in court;
- A written statement or document from a professional that helped you or your family member, such as a domestic violence or sexual assault victim advocate, a member of the clergy, or a healthcare provider.

Your employer must not violate your privacy or ask for unreasonable or expensive proof.

Do I Have to Give My Employer All the Details About the Violence?

No. It is only necessary to give your employer enough information to prove that you or your family member is a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking and that you need the leave for one of the reasons allowed under the law.

How Can I Protect My Privacy?

Your employer must keep your proof and any other statements about your need for this leave confidential. Your employer cannot share any of this information unless you say it's ok, or the employer is ordered by a court to share it, or the employer is required by another law to share it. Also, if you prove your need for this leave by giving your employer information about a professional who is helping you, your discussions with that professional are still confidential and protected by law.

Can I Take Leave to Help Someone Else?

You may take this leave to help your child, spouse, intimate partner, parent, grandparent, or parent-in-law who has been a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

Your employer may ask for proof that this person is your child, spouse, intimate partner, parent, grandparent, or parent-in-law. The legal term for intimate partner in this law is “in a dating relationship,” which means a social relationship of a romantic nature. That may include someone you are dating, your registered domestic partner, or your committed intimate partner. You can prove that the person is your family member by giving your employer one of the following:

- Your written statement;
- A birth certificate;
- A court order, or;
- Other similar documentation.

What If My Employer Refuses to Let Me Take Leave or Fires or Demotes Me?

If your employer does not follow the law, you can file a civil action in court, or you can file a complaint with the Department of Labor and Industries (L&I). To file a complaint with L&I, fill out a *Protected Leave Complaint* or call L&I's claims line. If L&I finds that your employer did not follow the law, they may issue a notice of infraction and fine your employer (\$500 for the first offense, or \$1,000 for other infractions within three years). L&I may also make your employer give you your job back.

Regardless of whether L&I decides to issue a notice or fine, you may file a civil action in court. In the civil action, you can ask the court to order your employer to give you your job back, and/or pay you money to compensate you for your lost wages and other damages.

Resources

More Information about Sick and Safe Leave

- Paid Sick Leave, Washington State Department of Labor & Industries
Online: www.lni.wa.gov/WorkplaceRights/LeaveBenefits/VacaySick/PaidSickLeave.asp
- Domestic Violence Leave: Washington State Department of Labor & Industries
Online:
www.lni.wa.gov/WorkplaceRights/LeaveBenefits/FamilyCare/DomViolence/default.asp
- Tacoma Paid Sick Leave
Online:
www.cityoftacoma.org/government/city_departments/finance/minimum_employment_standards/paid_sick_leave
- Seattle Paid Sick and Safe Time Ordinance
Online: www.seattle.gov/laborstandards/ordinances/paid-sick-and-safe-time

Domestic Violence Hotlines

- Washington State Domestic Violence Hotline
By phone: 1-800-562-6025 (toll-free)
Online: www.wadvhotline.org
- National Domestic Violence Hotline
By phone: 1-800-799-7233; (TTY) 1-800-787-3224
Online: www.thehotline.org

To Make a Complaint

- *Protected Leave Complaint*, the complaint form from the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries (L&I)
By phone: 1-800-LISTENS (1-800-547-8367) (toll-free)
Online: www.lni.wa.gov/WorkplaceRights/LeaveBenefits/FamilyCare/; click on “Domestic Violence Leave”, then “File a Protected Leave Complaint” under “For More Information”

Related Publications

- *Are you being stalked? Help is available*, by the King County Prosecutor’s Office
Online: www.stalkingpo.org
- Legal Voice publications:
Online: www.legalvoice.org/resources
 - *Employment Discrimination* (also available in Spanish)
 - *Family Leave Laws* (also available in Russian)
 - *Information for Stalking Victims in Washington State* (also available in Russian)
- Northwest Justice Project publications:
Online: www.washingtonlawhelp.org/issues/family-law/domestic-violence-1
 - *Domestic Violence: Can the Legal System Help Protect Me?* (also available in Spanish)
 - *Landlord/Tenant Issues for Survivors of Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault, and/or Stalking*

This publication provides general information concerning your rights and responsibilities. It is not intended as a substitute for specific legal advice. This information is current as of November 2016.

(Revised 10/23/19 by Chloë Phalan and Mai Nguyen)

Acknowledgments to Sara Ainsworth, Kelli Smith, Liz Turrin, June Krumpotick, Arcadia Corbett, and Lauren Akamine for their work on previous versions of this memo.

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