

Businesses enjoy return on investment in breastfeeding-friendly workplace

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Employers who provide a space where employees can express and store milk or breastfeed a baby quickly realize the benefits of doing so.

According to the New Mexico Breastfeeding Task Force, employers who comply with state and federal laws requiring them to provide a clean and private space for lactating mothers and to offer flexible break time so mothers can breastfeed or pump milk experience less absenteeism, lower health care costs and turnover rates, higher productivity and employee loyalty and positive community perception.

In other words, businesses that support breastfeeding employees are improving their own competitiveness and profitability.

“Absences due to infant illness occur twice as often among parents whose infants are not breastfed,” the task force says on its website, Breastfeedingnm.org. That translates into dramatic reductions in employer health-care costs for infants who are breastfed.

There’s evidence to back this assertion. The American Academy of Pediatrics’ website notes that human milk provides not just nutrients but also “many substances that benefit (the) baby’s immune system, including antibodies, immune factors, enzymes, and white blood cells,” all of which protect against common childhood infections and other illnesses well beyond infancy.

The task force works to convince businesses that supporting a breastfeeding employee is well worth whatever temporary inconvenience it might cause and helps employers develop workable policies.

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“Businesses tend to think it will be a bigger cost than it is,” said Monica Esparza, task force program manager. Businesses don’t have to carve out a new space for breastfeeding mothers, she noted. As long as they have a designated place, they comply with the law.

New Mexico state law is more comprehensive than federal law, according to Esparza. “Federal law offers protection for hourly employees,” she said, whereas, “New Mexico law doesn’t specify hourly or salaried,” so it applies to both.

Laws aside, the task force encourages managers to talk with expectant mothers about how the business will support their desire to continue breastfeeding their babies when they return from maternity leave by:

Providing a private, nearby space, such as an unused office, where moms can feed their babies or pump breast milk to feed the baby after work. It doesn’t need to be a permanent space but must be available when the employee needs it.

Offering the employee a work schedule that is flexible enough to accommodate lactation breaks. This might involve having coworkers cover for the employee while she’s on break. Employers aren’t required to pay for breaks that exceed the time required by state or federal law.

Providing a sanitary, cool place where a mother can store expressed milk for the limited time that she’s breastfeeding. It can be a staff refrigerator or a small refrigerator that the employee can use while breastfeeding.

Developing a lactation policy and making sure all managers, supervisors and employees understand and follow it.

The organization offers sample policies, printable handouts, and links to the laws that pertain to breastfeeding at work, including the federal Break Time for Nursing Mothers law, which applies

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to hourly employees covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act. More resources or solutions are available at www.womenshealth.gov/breastfeeding/employersolutions/index.html.

For help establishing a successful lactation program, employers can contact the organization at (505) 395-6455 or contact@breastfeedingnm.org .

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