

CITY OF ATLANTA

Paid Family Leave Study Group



Final Report and Recommendations

Produced by the Office of Councilmember Matt Westmoreland



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NOTE FROM THE CHAIR

Over the last several months, as I've visited with employees across City departments, young parents expressed concern about how to balance their commitment to public service with the responsibility of caring for their growing families.

That prompted me to author legislation proposing the Paid Family Leave Study Group. In May, City Council unanimously adopted 26-R-3544, bringing together experts in early childhood, maternal health and family policy alongside leaders from our Human Resources and Finance departments to review the City's existing policy and examine national best practices for supporting working families.

The City's current paid family leave policy was adopted in 2015, when Atlanta became the first municipal government in the metropolitan region to offer the benefit. But over the past decade, paid leave policies have evolved considerably. As Atlanta continues to compete for a talented and dedicated workforce — and works to become the best place to raise every child — it was time to take another look at our policy.

At its heart, these recommendations are simple: Every parent should have meaningful time to bond with a newborn. The Study Group recommends expanding paid parental leave to 12 weeks at 100% pay for either parent, eliminating the distinction between primary and secondary caregivers. It also recommends separate leave for parents whose children require NICU care, greater flexibility in how leave can be used, and paid time for prenatal medical appointments.

These are practical changes, but they reflect something more about the kind of city we want Atlanta to be.

If we want to be the best place for every child to grow up, parents should have meaningful time to bond with a new child without having to choose between being present for their family and receiving a paycheck. And the City should lead by example as an employer that recognizes the value of its workforce and the importance of strong families.

I'm grateful to our Study Group members for their time, expertise, and thoughtfulness. The completion of this report marks an important step forward, but it is not the end of this work. The Study Group also identified the need to continue examining paid medical and family leave more broadly, including how City employees may need time to care for themselves or other family members. I'm confident these recommendations will help us take the next step toward building a city where our employees can serve Atlanta, raise their families, and thrive— and where every child gets the strongest possible start.

Sincerely,



Councilmember Matt Westmoreland

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY GROUP

This study group was convened to review national best practices and provide recommendations for an update to the City of Atlanta's Paid Family Leave Policy (PFL). When the City's existing policy was adopted in June 2015, Atlanta became the first municipal government in the metropolitan region to offer the benefit.

But over the past decade, paid leave policies have expanded in both the public and private sectors. The City of Atlanta needed to examine its offerings to remain competitive in the race for workforce talent. But beyond that, we are all striving to make Atlanta the best place to raise every child. Our city code should reflect that vision.

STUDY GROUP OVERVIEW

In May 2026, the Atlanta City Council unanimously adopted 26-R-3544, authorizing the creation of a Study Group to examine best practices around the City of Atlanta's Paid Family Leave policies.

Serving as members of the Study Group were:

Sarah Phillips, Associate Director for Public Policy
The Rosalynn Carter Mental Health & Caregiver Program, The Carter Center

Jessica Woltjen, Senior Policy Manager for Early Childhood Education
Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS)

Jasmine Bowles, Georgia Executive State Director
Ogechi Oparah, Georgia Organizing Manager
9to5 Georgia

Margaret Master, Executive Director
Healthy Mothers Healthy Babies (HMHB)

Michael Kirkwood, Deputy Commissioner
City of Atlanta Human Resources Department

Mohamed Balla, Chief Financial Officer
City of Atlanta

Frank Haywood, Chief of Staff
Angie Storey, Sr. Executive Support
Office of the City Council President Marci Collier Overstreet

Chair: Matt Westmoreland
Atlanta City Council, Post 2 At-Large

The Study Group was staffed by Graham Younger, Director of Policy and Legislative Initiatives for the Post 2 Citywide Office.

June 22nd | City Hall, Terminus Conference Room

Attendance:

In-person:

CM Matt Westmoreland

Michael Kirkwood, City of Atlanta Human Resources

Ogechi Oparah, 9 to 5 Georgia

Jessica Woltjen, GEEARS

Margaret Masters, HMHB

Delaney, HMHB

Virtually:

City of Atlanta, CFO Mohamed Balla

Jasmine Bowles, 9 to 5 Georgia

Sarah Phillips, The Carter Center

Feroza Freeland, A Better Balance (Presenter)

Meeting Summary

The Study Group heard a presentation from Feroza Freeland, Policy Director of the Southern Office of A Better Balance, a nonprofit organization that works to pass Family Leave policies across the country. Her presentation focused on the landscape of Paid Family Leave policies, and gave a breakdown of peer municipalities' policies, focused on the Southeastern United States. Feroza also led a discussion of the benefits of various PFL policies on employee retention and overall satisfaction. The slide deck for the presentation is available in this report's appendix.

Councilmember Westmoreland's office gave a brief update on state-level and Atlanta-region PFL policies. This included a breakdown of the adopted legislation for Fulton County as well as publicly available data for the Atlanta metro region. CFO Balla weighed in on the current policy and its flexibility, as well as new benefits the city offers – like a free rental of a SNOO bassinet.

All parties agreed that changing demographics within the City's workforce are resulting in fewer employees having children and taking advantage of the policy as it stands. Multiple Study Group members mentioned that this policy will be a part of a larger puzzle, of other kinds of medical leave, lactation policy and other factors, that will determine how comfortable employees looking to start families will be with the City's policies. A suggestion was made (based on A Better Balance's presentation) to consider separate paid leave regarding doctor's visits in the prenatal period.

The meeting concluded with a request by the study group for proposed changes to the City Code, numerous suggestions of policies that would help recruit and retain talent to Atlanta, and a set date of July 13th for the next meeting.

July 13 | City Hall, Terminus Conference Room

Attendance:

In-person:

CM Westmoreland
Ogechi Oparah, 9to5 Georgia
Michael Kirkwood, CoA HR

Virtually:

Jasmine Bowles, 9to5 Georgia
Margaret Master HMHB
Jessica Woltjen, GEEARS

Meeting Summary

In the July meeting, the group worked through a first draft of changes to Section 114-418 in the City Code. The Study Group agreed that this draft was a strong start in its intention but worked through a series of changes to make the policy clearer.

A suggestion was made to clarify that NICU leave would be a separate period of leave, as opposed to parental leave, because it did not represent the time of parental bonding that this policy wanted to ensure.

HR raised concerns about the coding process and how it would need to adjust in the case of an employee taking intermittent leave. CM Westmoreland's Office agreed to follow up with the appropriate HR Directors and keep them informed as potential changes were proposed.

The Study Group concluded with a group request that in the first year of any changed policy, data be collected as to how many employees used the leave, for how long, and what their overall experience was.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Study Group's Recommendations are as follows:

1. To expand the amount of Paid Parental Leave employees are eligible for from six weeks for the primary caregiver and two weeks for the nonprimary caregiver— to 12 weeks.
2. To remove the distinction between primary and secondary caregivers, so that any parent will be eligible for those 12 weeks.
3. To designate separate leave for parents whose children spend time in the NICU.
4. To create flexibility about when parents can schedule their leave, whether consecutively or intermittently.
5. To add separate paid leave for doctor's visits that occur because of prenatal health issues.

These recommendations will help make the City of Atlanta competitive with other municipalities and private sector employees in terms of paid time off. By removing the distinction between primary and secondary caregivers, both parents gain crucial time in which to bond with their child. There is also an acknowledgment of the unique situation when a child spends time in the NICU, so that parents can have a separate bucket of paid leave for that stressful period, if it occurs. The recommendations propose separate paid leave for doctor's visits that occur because of prenatal health issues an employee may experience.

The group also acknowledged that any change in policy must be communicated to the City's workforce. Education and training will likely be necessary for implementing these changes, particularly within the human resources department.

Finally, the Study Group recommended a further course of action: to continue to study all varieties of Paid Medical Leave, given the state of Atlanta's workforce, with many employees at different stages of their life. While this Study Group focused on changing the parental leave policy, opportunity to look more closely at how employees might use medical leave to care for other family members would be valuable for the City.

Proposed Changes to Code Section 114-418

Section 114-418

(a) An employee who is a caregiver for a child/children shall be entitled, during any 12-month rolling period, to time off with pay not to exceed twelve weeks at 100% of the employee's base pay, per qualifying event, for child caregiver leave in relation to the following events:

- (1) Birth of a biological or surrogate child or children; or
- (2) Legal adoption of a child or children under the age of 18 years; or
- (3) Becoming a foster parent to a child or children under the age of 18 years through the Georgia Division of Family and Children's Services, or a related or successor state agency.
- (4) Stillbirth, defined as loss of a pregnancy after 20 weeks; and
- (5) Hospitalization of the employee's child in a NICU (or other medical facility specializing in the care of premature or critically ill infants).

(b) Child caregiver leave provided in this code section must be utilized within a six-month period following the qualifying event. Leave may be taken continuously, or intermittently with supervisor approval.

(c) Eligible employees will be entitled to 40 hours of paid leave for medical care associated with the prenatal period.

(d) Employees must provide documentation of the basis for any leave requested under this Code section.

(e) Child caregiver leave provided in this Code section shall run concurrently with approved FMLA leave relating to any event listed in subsection (a)(1)—(3) above.

STUDY GROUP FEEDBACK

9to5 Georgia is thrilled to celebrate the City of Atlanta's historic proposal to expand paid parental leave to twelve weeks at 100% pay for both parents. For too long, welcoming a new child has been a source of immense stress for workers across the state. By extending equal twelve-week leave to both parents, Atlanta is providing a critical lifeline that allows families to navigate the transformative first months of life together with dignity. This victory is a vital first step toward a truly comprehensive family-support system.

While expanding paid leave is a monumental win for working parents in the City of Atlanta, we recognize that families need care throughout their life cycle. We look forward to more policy expansions that provide comprehensive care solutions, including paid family and medical leave, which allows an employee paid time off to care for their own serious health conditions, or an ailing spouse, parent, or child. We look forward to learning more about the caregiving needs in Atlanta, and throughout our state, so that no working family has to choose between maintaining their paycheck and maintaining their health.

9to5 Georgia

GEEARS: Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students is a statewide policy, research, and advocacy organization focused on the healthy development of children from birth to five. GEEARS also leads Promise All Atlanta Children Thrive (PAACT), a citywide alliance of public and private partners working to improve learning, health, and well-being outcomes for Atlanta's youngest children and their families. Through PAACT, GEEARS was pleased to participate in the City's Paid Family Leave Study Group and strongly supports the proposed expansion of paid parental leave to 12 weeks for all caregivers. The proposal addresses important gaps in the current policy while also recognizing circumstances such as stillbirth or a child's hospitalization in the NICU. Strong early relationships between infants and their caregivers play a critical role in healthy development, and paid parental leave gives families valuable time to build those connections while supporting newborn health and helping employers retain valued workers.

Looking ahead, GEEARS and PAACT encourage the City to provide families with greater flexibility in using parental leave by extending the current six-month timeframe through a child's first year. As the expanded policy is implemented, the City could also survey or interview employees who use the benefit to better understand how families use their leave and identify opportunities for continued improvement. Greater



flexibility could be particularly valuable as families navigate childcare arrangements, medical needs, and the transition back to work. When Atlanta first adopted paid parental leave in 2015, the City helped lead the way for other local governments in the region. Atlanta has an opportunity to lead again by continuing to learn from families' experiences and strengthen its policies for young children and working families.

GEEARS

As an organization that has worked for more than 50 years to advance maternal and infant health across Georgia, Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition of Georgia is pleased to see the City of Atlanta strengthen paid parental leave for its employees. We are particularly encouraged by the Study Group's consideration of the needs of families experiencing stillbirth or caring for an infant hospitalized in a NICU. The postpartum period is critical for maternal recovery, infant health, breastfeeding and perinatal mental health, and evidence shows that access to paid leave supports better maternal and infant health outcomes. Paid leave also contributes to employee retention and a strong workforce.

Looking ahead, we hope the City will consider options to advance paid leave more broadly, including leave for employees who need to care for themselves or a family member. We also look forward to exploring other policies that support a healthy start for moms and babies and a strong workforce, including lactation support, doula benefits and other maternal and family health supports. HMHBGA welcomes the opportunity to bring our statewide experience to this work and support Atlanta's continued leadership.

Healthy Mothers Healthy Babies

A PATH FORWARD

This report is being submitted to the Finance-Executive Committee on Wednesday, August 26. Legislation for relevant code changes will be introduced by Councilman Westmoreland at the Full Council meeting on September 8.

While the above recommendations focus mostly on parental leave, the Study Group acknowledges that other policies around Paid Leave might require further research into the City's practices. CM Westmoreland's Office will continue to reach out to experts to find ways to make the City of Atlanta the best place to raise a family.

APPENDIX

A Presentation from A Better Balance, by Feroza Freeland



Paid Family Leave for Local Government Employees

June 22nd, 2026

About Us



Feroza Freeland
Policy Director of the
Southern Office

A Better Balance: A national, nonprofit work-family legal advocacy organization, with a regional Southern Office in Nashville, TN

Our Mission: To ensure all workers can care for themselves and the people they love—without sacrificing their financial security.

Benefits of Paid Family Leave



- ✓ Improves employee recruitment, retention, and morale
- ✓ Keeps the city competitive with leading employers
- ✓ Helps fill child care gaps
- ✓ Supports maternal and child health
- ✓ Boosts economic security for families

Key Elements of Paid Family Leave Policies



- Who is covered
- Number of weeks
- Covered purposes
- Rate of pay

Key Elements of Paid Family Leave Policies

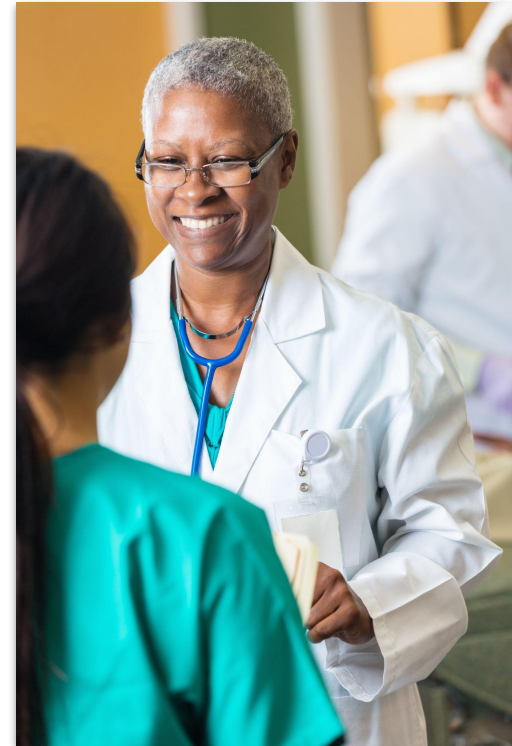


- Eligibility requirements
- Definition of family member
- Job protection
- Interaction with federal FMLA



Best Practices

- ✓ **Provide at least 12 weeks of leave**
- ✓ **Parity for both parents**
- ✓ **Provide 100% pay**
- ✓ **Reduce eligibility barriers**



Best Practices

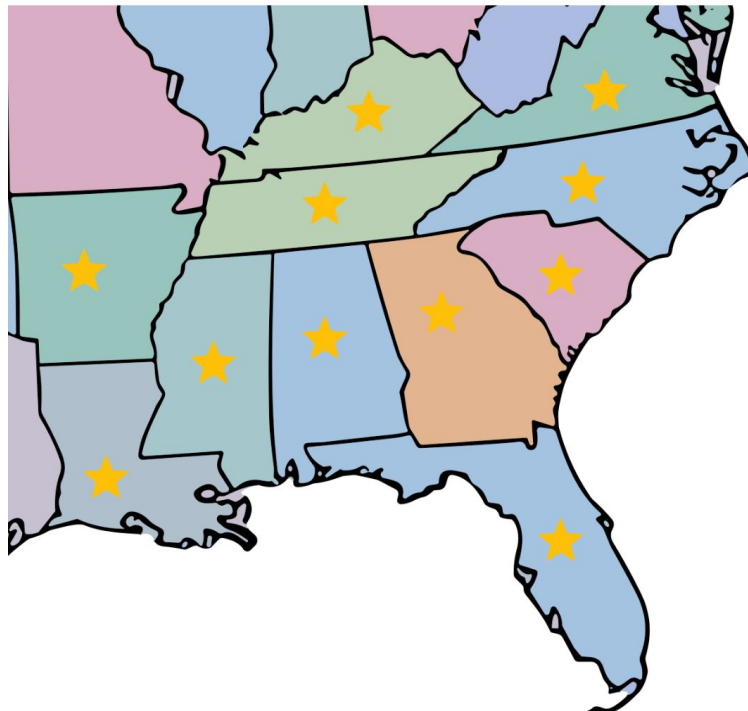


**Consider paid leave across the lifespan,
including:**

- **Caregiving for ill or aging family members**
- **Employee's own serious medical needs**
- **Safe leave for domestic violence victims**

Current Landscape

State and local governments across the South have rapidly expanded their paid family leave policies in recent years.



Peer Cities: Little Rock, Arkansas



- 12 weeks
- Covers birth, adoption, foster placement, pregnancy loss, surrogacy
- Includes both parents
- Enacted in 2026

[Link to policy](#)

Peer Cities: Houston, Texas

- 12 weeks
- Covers birth, adoption, foster placement
- Includes both parents
- Additional 4 weeks of leave for prenatal appointments
- Additional 40 hours of infant wellness leave for medical care during the infant's first year after birth
- Enacted in 2022

[Link to policy](#)

Peer Cities: Louisville, Kentucky



- 12 weeks for birth/adoption; 2 weeks for foster/kinship placement
- Covers birth, adoption, and foster/kinship care placement
- Includes both parents
- Enacted in 2021

[Link to policy](#)

Peer Cities: New Orleans, Louisiana

- 12 weeks
- Covers birth, adoption, and foster placement
- Includes both parents
- Enacted in 2023

[Link to policy](#)

Peer Cities: Nashville, Tennessee



- 6 weeks
- Covers birth, adoption, and caring for a parent, spouse, or child with a serious health condition
- Includes both parents
- Enacted in 2017

[Link to policy](#)

Outcomes from Louisville's Policy



A 2024 study of Louisville's paid parental leave policy found:

- Paid parental leave reduced financial stress for employees and their families
- Most employees, including supervisors, expressed enthusiastic support for the paid leave benefits

[More Info](#)

Outcomes from Louisville's Policy



“Parental leave helped our family financially by deferring expensive childcare costs... Having experienced it, parental leave is a necessary benefit for all employees to help align work/home balance. I feel I am a better parent and employee because of being able to take parental leave.”

– Matt Vanderpool, Louisville employee

Thank you!

a better  balance