



## HOW MAIN STREET ALLIANCE FIGHTS FOR—AND WINS—PAID LEAVE

### WINTER 2023

Since its founding, Main Street Alliance has been at the forefront of the fight for paid family and medical leave. Main Street Alliance recognizes the transformational impact state and national investment in a paid leave system could have for small business owners, their businesses, and their employees. In 2023, an innovative and strategic coalition won paid family and medical leave in Minnesota, with Main Street Alliance bringing the true small business voice to this critical debate. The Minnesota victory offers important lessons learned for the fights to come.

### EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES LOSE OUT WITHOUT THIS BENEFIT - PAID LEAVE IS A WIN-WIN

True small business owners with less than 50 employees reject the false claim that policy fights must pit workers against employers. Coffee shop owner Andrew Kopplin couldn't afford to pay his employees when serious illness struck—fighting to keep their jobs open "left us as small-business owners financially and emotionally drained and our employees with inadequate time to recover and care for themselves." A paid leave program like Minnesota passed "would have allowed our employees to keep their jobs and receive their benefits, all while saving us time, energy and dollars."

That's why when it comes to paid leave, Alyshia Jackson, owner of 1st Class Cleaning Services, says, "I'm willing to pay for it. My employees are willing to pay for it. It's affordable." As the owner of Next Day Animations, Caitlin Rogers, testified in support of paid leave, "The last thing we want is our employees choosing between work or family." As Main Street Alliance consistently advocated, paid leave policies like Minnesota's are "affordable, accessible, and sustainable" for small business owners.



### INCLUDING THE FULL DIVERSITY OF SMALL BUSINESS EXPERIENCES IS ESSENTIAL

Main Street Alliance organizes a diverse set of small business leaders, with particular emphasis on underrepresented small business owners to tell their own stories and lived experiences. In Minnesota, MSA organized and empowered Black and brown small business owners. In May, the Governor signed this bill into law, which will go into effect in 2026. To fully meet the needs of small businesses, it was equally critical to bring together the full range of small businesses, from community mainstays to brand new shops, from established employers to solopreneurs, from retail to services to creative work, and beyond. A policy can only meet the needs of small business owners if small business owners are at the table.

### WHILE LARGE BUSINESSES CAN PAY OUT OF POCKET, SMALL BUSINESSES NEED GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT IN PAID LEAVE TO KEEP THE EMPLOYEES THEY NEED AND HAVE INVESTED IN

"I need help with a way to fund longer paid time off. I need help to support young families who don't want to give up jobs they enjoy to get the benefits they need to survive," said bakery owner Daniel Swenson-Klatt. But without the support his business needs, employees may have to leave for larger employers who can afford to pay for leave out of pocket, putting small businesses

at a disadvantage. Alyshia Jackson summarized, "If I want reliable people, I have to be able to offer them services where they feel safe and they feel supported." As MSA members recognize, policy inaction isn't neutral, forcing small business owners to scramble while placing them at a recruiting and retention disadvantage.

### **SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS NEED PAID LEAVE FOR THEMSELVES**

For true small business owners like Main Street Alliance members, the urgent need for paid leave isn't just about their business but their health and families. When KB Brown, owner of Wolfpack Promotionals, was in a serious car accident, "I know I need to take time off, but I can't. As a business owner, if you don't work, you don't eat." Without paid leave, small business owners must face impossible choices, like those Alyshia Jackson confronted after surgery: "Do I shut my doors and take care of my health? Or do I continue to show up and sabotage my recovery?" Small business owners deserve better- the paid leave they need to heal, care, and bond without risking their business, health, or family.

### **MAIN STREET ALLIANCE SPOTLIGHTED THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF SOLO ENTREPRENEURS**

MSA member Cassie Sawyer tried to purchase commercial insurance policies to cover her income in the event of disability or leave of absence, but "all insurers that I have reached out to have informed me that unless I was working for a business that offered it to all of their employees, I did not have the option for coverage as a self-employed person." In her words, this gap "has delayed me being able to start a family and left me in fear of getting sick or hurt because there is no way that my business can run without me." As self-employed hairstylist Renee Hershkovitz testified in support of Minnesota's bill, "This legislation would be a game changer for self-employed trade workers as our body is the main tool of our craft. If we become injured due to an accident or repetitive motion injury, we cannot work from home."

### **PROGRESS REQUIRES PLAYING THE LONG GAME**

In Minnesota, the path to paid leave victory took a decade of work from the Main Street Alliance and leaders like Children's Defense Fund-MN, ISAIAH, and the Minnesota AFL-CIO. Many MSA members who originally championed the policy at that time went out of business as the COVID-19 pandemic sent shockwaves through small businesses nationwide. Conversely, many of the MSA members who were crucial to the law's final passage had yet to start their businesses when the campaign began. The challenges created by this churn only underline how essential groups

like Main Street Alliance are in providing a sustained organizational home for small business advocacy that learns, grows, and perseveres.

### **REAL POWER BUILDING TAKES REAL ORGANIZING**

Main Street Alliance invested in on-the-ground direct organizing in Minnesota, bringing true small business owners from across the state together. These small business owners weren't just figureheads or examples—they were leaders in their own right, shaping strategy and carrying the weight of the work. While other groups claimed to represent small businesses, Main Street Alliance members were the ones showing up in force, speaking in their own voices, and ultimately carrying the day. This goes to the heart of Main Street Alliance's theory of change: member-driven deep organizing for long-term power building, generating victories by and with small business owners.

### **WHAT'S NEXT?**

Winning the passage of legislation is critical—but it's not the end. In Minnesota, MSA will refocus its work on implementing the paid leave law we helped win, ensuring that it meets our member's needs. These efforts will join our work in other states working to implement their own paid leave laws. For example, Maine also won a new paid leave law in 2023, resulting from a powerful coalition push where small business organizing was essential.

At the same time, the fight to enact paid leave continues around the country. We will keep building small business power in states nationwide to fight for and win the policies our members need, like paid leave. We will continue to work in partnership in the fight for paid leave at the federal level—recognizing that true paid leave for all must include small business owners.

Main Street Alliance has been invested in on-the-ground direct organizing in Minnesota, Oregon, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin, and Maine, bringing together true small business owners nationwide to pass Paid Family and Medical Leave. These small business owners weren't just figureheads or examples—they were leaders in their own right, shaping strategy and carrying the weight of the work.

While other groups may claim to represent small businesses, Main Street Alliance members show up in force, speaking in their own voices, and ultimately carrying the day. Main Street Alliance's theory of change: member-driven deep organizing for long-term power building, generating victories by and with small business owners.