

MANDATORY PAID SICK LEAVE PETITION FACES TIME CRUNCH AS ORGANIZERS SPREAD TENTACLES



Rights activists, who had initiated a petition, requiring Orlando businesses to provide employees with paid sick days said Friday, that they were planning to make it a nationwide protest. Citizens for a Greater Orlando have filed the requisite formalities with the Orange County Supervisor of Elections that will allow them to attest signatures of those in favor of paid sick leave on the petition. If the group, manage to collect the mandatory number of signatures, this issue could go to the ballot in November, this year. A favorable ballot would mean that businesses across Orange County would have no choice but to offer the benefit. The new legislation could potentially have a life-changing impact on tens of thousands of service-sector workers in, what is perceived as a family-tourism capital. "A lot of our allies are very excited about it because of the large number of people it would help," said Stephanie Porta of Organize Now, which has lent its support to the coalition of organizations that make up Citizens for a Greater Orlando. When the activists commenced their agitation, a couple of weeks ago, it was Orlando centric. But their desire to seal the issue in the November elections motivated them to make it a countrywide issue as the county elections supervisor's regulations disallows cities from placing local questions on countywide ballots in presidential years. Supervisor of Elections Bill Cowles said that doing so would make an already crowded ballot unmanageable. Rather than postponement, till after the Presidential elections, the coalition decided to shift to a countywide effort. The group demands that, businesses with a minimum of 15 full- or part-time employees must compulsorily offer paid sick time. Workers would earn one hour of sick time for every 37 hours they work, up to a maximum of 56 hours of sick time. For smaller businesses with less than 15 employees, the group had made an exemptions that they would not have to offer paid sick time, but they would not be allowed to penalize workers who take unpaid time off because they or a family member is sick. However, their plan to turn the local effort into a national one could make the whole program come unstuck as the group would need to virtually double the number of signatories to the petition. A citywide initiative mandates 20,000 signatures from registered voters, however for a countywide effort, the number more than doubles to 43,605 signatures. To ensure that, rejected signatures, and of those there are going to be quite a few, do not see them fall short of the target the group aims to get at least 15 to 20 percent more signatures. "Not every petition is going to be valid," Cowles said. "They better bring me 15 to 20 percent more." There are tight deadlines to be met, as ballot paper has to be printed. "We're shooting to get everything by the end of June, but in terms of a legal timeline, we think we have until mid-July," Porta said. "It's a huge task." Porta said, a countrywide agitation could actually turn to be a blessing in disguise as Orlando residents, who live outside the city's mailing list, would find their signatures stamped valid in a countrywide agitation.