

BEST STATES TO WORK INDEX 2026: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Best States to Work Index (BSWI) surveys 37 labor policies across all 50 U.S. states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico. The annual index examines policies in three categories: wages, worker protections, and rights to organize and collectively bargain. The BSWI provides a roadmap that federal and state policymakers can follow to improve the lives of workers and their families and to stem rising inequality. Policies should ensure working families can thrive—no matter where they live.

WAGES

Policymakers must raise the minimum wage, eliminate sub-minimum wages (including for tipped workers, youth, and workers with disabilities), and end minimum wage exclusions. Policymakers should ensure that the minimum wage keeps up with the cost of living, including by tying automatic wage increases to inflation.

At the federal level, the [Raise the Wage Act](#) would raise the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$17; enact automatic, indexed wage increases; and gradually eliminate subminimum wages for tipped workers, workers with disabilities, and youth.

State policymakers can look to Washington state's minimum wage policy as a model. While Washington's minimum wage is still inadequate to support a family, it (1) ties automatic annual wage increases to the level of inflation, (2) allows localities to set a higher wage than the state standard, and (3) eliminates the subminimum tipped wage. However, Washington fails to fully extend minimum wage protections to farmworkers.

The [Fair Wages for Home Care Workers Act](#) would amend the Fair Labor Standards Act to extend federal minimum wage and overtime protections to millions of home care workers.

WORKER PROTECTIONS

We need stronger worker protections at the state and federal levels, including paid family and medical leave, strengthened equal pay laws and sexual harassment protections, paid pumping breaks, protections against bossware, and protections for caregivers and domestic workers.

PAID LEAVE

Congress should guarantee paid sick leave and paid family and medical leave for all workers. At the federal level, the [FAMILY Act](#) would guarantee up to 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave for reasons ranging from medical issues to childbirth, or to support care responsibilities. The [Healthy Families Act](#) would guarantee up to seven paid sick days a year for short-term illness, preventive care, caring for a sick family member, or seeking assistance related to domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

More states have started to fill the gap by enacting paid sick and family leave programs. [Oregon's paid leave policy](#) is comprehensive, covering private, public, and part-time employees, and extending "safe leave" coverage for survivors of sexual assaults, domestic violence, harassment, or stalking.

EQUAL PAY

At the federal level, the [Paycheck Fairness Act](#) aims to close the gender wage gap by strengthening the Equal Pay Act, including limiting employers' reliance on an applicant's salary history, protecting workers from retaliation for discussing their wages, and requiring employers to prove that pay disparities are not solely related to gender.

States can strengthen equal pay laws, too, by mandating equal pay across both the private and public sectors, and restricting pay secrecy practices and salary history requirements in the private sector. [New York](#) and [New Jersey](#)'s equal pay laws include a comprehensive list of protected classes.



To see the full data set or where states rank, please visit oxfam.com/statemap2026



PROTECTIONS FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS

The [Domestic Workers Bill of Rights Act](#) extends pay and leave rights to domestic workers while mandating health and safety precautions, including protections around fair and flexible scheduling. [Twelve states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and two major cities](#) have already passed their own domestic workers bill of rights.

HEAT PROTECTION STANDARDS

As temperatures and heat-related worker deaths continue to climb, a set of federal heat protections for all workers is essential. At the federal level, the [Asunción Valdivia Heat Illness, Injury, and Fatality Prevention Act](#) would require the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to enact a strong standard protecting indoor and outdoor workers from heat.

While we wait for the federal heat standard, states can implement their own heat-related worker protections. For example, Oregon, Washington, California, Colorado, Maryland, and Nevada have passed their own heat standards. Other states should follow suit, and all should include protections for both outdoor and indoor workers.

WAREHOUSE WORKER PROTECTIONS

Congress should pass the [Warehouse Worker Protection Act](#) to protect workers from abusive, dangerous productivity and speed quotas that drive high rates of worker injury. The bill requires transparency around quotas, prohibits management from enforcing quotas that interfere with workers' ability to take breaks or use the restroom, and protects workers from punishment for failing to meet impermissible quotas.

[Washington, Oregon, New York, Minnesota, California, Rhode Island, and Connecticut](#) have already enacted their own warehouse worker protection laws. State policymakers should look to these models.

BOSSWARE PROTECTIONS

Policymakers should pass laws that protect workers from the use of bossware, including requiring employers to disclose to workers when they use electronic monitoring and automated decision systems, ensuring that the use of AI and automated decision systems does not result in bias or discrimination, and enacting protections regarding the use of AI in employment decisions. At the federal level, the [No Robot Bosses Act](#) and the [Stop Spying Bosses Act](#) would help protect workers from bossware.

[Illinois](#) has strong worker protections against bossware. Other states should follow Illinois' lead in protecting workers from electronic monitoring and algorithmic management.

CAREGIVER DISCRIMINATION PROTECTIONS

Policymakers should ensure that workers can juggle their jobs with their caregiving responsibilities, including by enacting protections that prohibit discrimination based on caregiving responsibilities or familial status. Policymakers should define protections to capture the broad range of caregiving relationships and responsibilities that workers hold.

RIGHTS TO ORGANIZE

The federal government must strengthen workers' rights to build power collectively. Policymakers should end all exclusions from the rights to organize and collectively bargain, and they should enable sectoral bargaining alongside workplace-level collective bargaining.

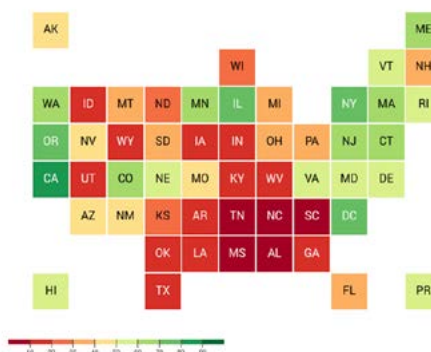
At the federal level, the [Richard L. Trumka Protecting the Right to Organize \(PRO\) Act](#) would expand the protections around workers' rights to bargain and organize as a collective.

States can support rights to organize and collectively bargain, including by:

- Repealing "right-to-work" laws.
- Protecting the rights of state and local employees, including public school teachers, to collectively bargain. [Illinois](#) is a good example.
- Passing laws enabling excluded workers, like agricultural workers, to collectively bargain.

EXPLORE THE INTERACTIVE MAPS

To see the full dataset or where states rank, please visit oxfam.am/statemap2026



FIGHTING INEQUALITY TO BUILD A BETTER WORLD

Oxfam believes that poverty is a policy choice, and that the ultrawealthy and giant corporations have hijacked our systems to benefit a select few. We are working to redress the balance of power, putting it back in the hands of working families in the U.S. and around the world.

PATRICIA STOTTLEMYER
POLICY LEAD, LABOR RIGHTS
PATRICIA.STOTTLEMYER@OXFAM.ORG
(202) 989-8883

US POLICY & ADVOCACY
1101 17TH STREET NW, SUITE 1300
WASHINGTON, DC 20036-4710
(202) 496-1180

info@oxfamamerica.org
oxfamamerica.org

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