

Minnesota Chamber advocates for uniform labor laws

By Doug Loon

Minnesota business owners and managers already have their hands full when it comes to complying with state and federal workplace regulations. Now imagine if you are tasked with facing two, three, four – or more – distinctive sets of local laws dictating private-sector employee wages and benefits.

A disturbing trend is emerging in Minnesota.

Minneapolis and St. Paul have passed ordinances scheduled to go into effect July 1 that require businesses to provide paid sick time. The specifics of the mandates are different in each city. In Duluth, a task force is studying the issue and scheduled to make its recommendation in November. It's only a matter of time before the movement comes to a city near you.

That's why the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce and our local chamber partners are pursuing passage of the Uniform State Labor Standards Act at the Legislature. The law would explicitly preempt local governments from enacting their own their minimum wage laws and mandates on businesses including predictive scheduling and paid sick and safe time.

An important next step in our efforts occurred last week with Senate passage of a bill. The House passed its version in March. A conference committee will work through the slight differences in the bills and send it to Governor Dayton.

The governor has expressed reservations with the bill, but he not gone so far as to say he'll veto it. In similar fashion, legislative leaders have said they are not interested in sending the governor a bill that he will automatically reject. Against that backdrop, we are hopeful that consensus can be reached.

To be clear, we do not believe government at any level should dictate private-sector employee benefits. However, the only thing worse than state government demanding one-size-fits-all mandates is for local governments to do so. Consider the fact that Minnesota has 853 cities and 87 counties. A patchwork of local laws would be an administrative nightmare for employers, especially those with operations in multiple locations.

Today's worker shortage is front and center across all industry sectors in all corners of the state. Minnesota's unemployment rate dropped another notch to 3.8 percent in March compared with the national rate of 4.5 percent. The statistics already demand that employers voluntarily offer expanded wages and benefits to attract and retain employees, and they're doing so.

The question of local control has surfaced in the debate. The Minnesota Chamber and our partners generally support keeping decision-making close to the people. Our system of government values local control in certain policy areas such as issuance of zoning approvals and assessment of property taxes. In other areas, though, Minnesota has realized the benefits of statewide consistency. Look no further than areas such as the criminal code; consumer protection laws; banking, insurance and securities regulations; and occupational licensing.

We enthusiastically support and encourage employers to provide employees with paid options for providing care to their families. Flexibility is the key. It's a far better approach to have employers sit down with employees to develop policies that work for individual workplaces. This approach recognizes the uniqueness of each workplace. Imposing a one-size-fits-all mandate replaces creativity and flexibility with a straightjacket.

Doug Loon is president of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce – www.mnchamber.com.