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Obamas push for flexibility in workplace

Forum recognizes companies that meet the needs of their employees

By Katherine Skiba, Tribune Newspapers

8:43 PM CDT, March 30, 2010

WASHINGTON

— President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama will push for flexible workplace policies on Wednesday at a White House forum for business leaders, academics and policy experts.

"Millions of women and men across the country struggle to balance the demands of their jobs and the needs of their families," the president said in announcing the Forum on Workplace Flexibility.

Several dozen participants are expected, ranging from small-business owners to the leaders of major firms, including the Sara Lee Corp., which is based in Downers Grove, Ill., and has 41,000 employees worldwide.

The global food giant has enhanced its flexible-work arrangements to include nontraditional stop and start times, working remotely, job sharing, leaves of absence and so-called returnships, targeted at midcareer employees who have been out of the work force for a number of years, such as stay-at-home mothers, said Mark Demich, vice president of organization development.

Sara Lee officials are going to the forum to share, to listen and "to take this to the next level, instead of staying stagnant," he said.

Demich said his firm tries to "look at the whole person, not just a Sara Lee employee," and to respect that people may have commitments for child care, elder care or spousal care or to schools, churches or community groups.

Even amid 9.7 percent unemployment, that approach is good business, he said.

"If and when the economy starts to pick up and turn, I think our employees will feel well-treated, that we took into account their work-life balance and outside commitments," Demich said. The bottom line: They'll be more apt "to stay and deliver more," he said.

It's a pragmatic approach because the "millennial generation" of young people report that they value flexibility even more than compensation, Demich said, and "that's our work force of the future."

Other companies expected to participate include Abbott Laboratories, Accenture, American Express, Deloitte & Touche, Ernst & Young, GlaxoSmithKline and Intel.

Look for the administration to announce a pilot project on flexibility involving federal workers, said White House senior adviser Valerie Jarrett, who leads its Council on Women and Girls, which is organizing the forum.

The event is timed with a new report titled "Work-Life Balance and the Economics of Workplace Flexibility" from the White House Council of Economic Advisers. The report notes that women represent nearly half the labor force; that in nearly half of U.S. households, all adults are working; and that 43.5 million Americans act as unpaid caregivers to relatives aged 50 or older.

"We are convinced that a productive and efficient work force is one that modernizes to reflect the times that we're in," Jarrett said.

Jarrett, asked whether she supported government incentives to encourage employers to adopt flexible practices, said the administration was starting by recognizing companies for a "job well done."

Some participants, such as Workplace Flexibility 2010, an initiative at Georgetown University Law Center, advocate for a comprehensive national policy on workplace flexibility.

"The White House is beginning an urgently needed national conversation," said Katie Corrigan, the initiative's co-director.

She said more than \$100 million in academic research since the early 1990s leads to the same conclusion: "There's a mismatch between the way work is structured and the needs of the modern workforce."

It's not only the parents of young children who feel the pinch, she said, citing caregivers for elderly parents and those interested in "phased retirement," or gradually leaving the work force as opposed to quitting entirely.

Also represented will be the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, whose Institute for a Competitive Workforce teams up with partners every year to honor employers with flexible policies.

"Our vision of flexibility is it has to work both for the employer and the employee," said Karen Elzey, vice president of the institute.

She added that many employers have found that adopting flexible practices and changing the culture of their work force are good tools for attracting and retaining employees.

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