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Many Vermonters have a story to tell about why we urgently need a strong, statewide paid family and medical leave program. This is mine.

I was diagnosed with a rare and serious condition that required me to deliver my daughter immediately at 38 weeks. The birth was physically and emotionally painful with life-threatening complications.

The final complication was that our daughter, Emma, was born with a cleft palate. We had five appointments in that first week before she ultimately had surgery.

Becoming a new parent is stressful for most, but the additional pressure of a newborn with a serious medical condition was overwhelming. We spent every waking moment navigating her care.

When Emma was 2 weeks old, we decided to put the near constant advocacy aside for a moment and try to enjoy our time together as a new family. I cradled her against my chest and thought "OK, this is what I imagined."

Then I got a call from my office's short-term disability company. They informed me that because Emma was born early, I did not meet the mandated six consecutive months of continuous coverage that would entitle me to paid leave. I was short by three hours. I fought the decision from every angle, but there was nothing they could do.

I hung up and felt like the room was caving in. My partner is a Navy veteran in school, so we survive on my income alone. We couldn't afford to take unpaid leave, especially with the cost of Emma's medical care.

My only choice was to go back to work when Emma was just three weeks old. I was so tired I could barely function. Reading was difficult. Forming a sentence felt impossible, let alone running a meeting.

My work suffered. My relationship with my daughter suffered. I relived the trauma of the birth over and over. I had no time to process. I had work to do.

Every day, I wonder how different the beginning of Emma's life would have been if I had the paid leave we desperately needed. I'm not alone in this experience. Right now, an estimated 73% of Vermont workers do not have access to paid family and medical leave.

With paid leave, growing families have a strong start. They are healthier, happier, and more economically secure. They're better workers. They're better parents.

Vermont has a roadmap to a cost-effective and equitable way to ensure paid leave is there for workers when they need it. It's time to pass the strong paid family and medical leave program Vermonters need.