

To: Vermont Child Poverty Council

Date: August 13, 2014

My name is Mary Claire Carroll. I am a sole proprietor of a portrait photography studio in Richmond, and a long time member of Burlington Business and Professional Women's (BPW) organization, and a former Commissioner on the Vermont Commission on Women where I chaired the Economic Equity and Security Committee. I have spent a number of years working on the issue of paid sick days for all Vermont workers, and currently represent Burlington BPW on the paid sick day coalition. Why? Because I believe that if all Vermonters had access to paid sick days at work they would be more economically secure, their families would be stronger, our businesses would be more productive, and most of all, Vermont would be a healthier place to live and work.

Today, I am speaking to you as a long time advocate for women's equity and fairness in the workplace. And although I am not officially speaking for the Vermont Commission on Women I will be representing their view and support for paid sick day legislation that echoes mine.

Women in Vermont and throughout America are disproportionately impacted by lack of paid sick day benefits at work because they are more likely than men to work part time and to be in low wage jobs. In 2011, 27 percent of employed women usually worked part time, or fewer than 35 hours a week. By comparison only 11 percent of men worked part time. Typically a couple may work out a strategy where one parent might cut back their work hours so that they can be available in case a child is sick or needs after school care. Yet approximately three fourths of married mothers who work part time still miss work when their child is sick and only a small percentage of those mothers have access to paid sick days.

A recent report in the Atlantic Monthly, "Women in Poverty: An American Crisis" pointed out that 62% of minimum wage jobs are held by women. And 82% of workers making \$8.25 per hour or less don't have access to paid sick days. The Institute of Women's Policy Research reported another frustrating statistic in their 2011 report on access to paid sick days, more than half of working mothers (54%) do not have even a few paid sick days they can use to care for their sick children.

All of this means that these working women live in fear and on edge constantly. A simple cold, the flu, a child breaking an arm, means facing the choice of losing their job or facing disastrously reduced income if they take the time off to care for their loved one.

I have two stories to share. These involve women who have raised their children but I think it illustrates the fear that pervades the life of a worker when it comes to work and health issues. A BPW member who works for a local municipality asked for time off to care for her dying father. Her supervisor first refused and then agreed after some union pressure. After her father passed away she went back to work but was greeted with a negative performance review, the first ever, and has found herself working in a toxic environment. The last time I saw her she had lost 30 pounds and was ill herself but did not feel she could leave her job because of financial concerns.

The other is a relative of mine in her 50's who works a clerical job for a health provider. She is currently facing major surgery for chronic health issues. She makes a little over minimum wage and has access to medical leave benefits but they only cover 66% of her current salary and are for a limited amount of time. She has told me that she has seen people who have come back to work after the benefits have expired have lost their jobs. She is fearful that recovery from her much needed surgery might take longer

than the benefit period, and of course feels she will lose her apartment because she can't survive on 66% of her low income wage. So she continues to postpone the surgery. She describes her workplace as toxic as well.

Access to paid sick leave is incredibly important to working women because of double burden they face, not only their own self care, but the care of a sick child or aging relative. Women, even as more fathers become stay at home Dads, still bear the brunt of caregiving responsibilities. Almost 75 percent of all employed mothers report staying home from work when their child is sick compared to 40 percent of fathers. Even taking into account married women who work full time with a spouse working full time, the numbers only drop down to 73% staying home. A Congressional report on 'Expanding Access to Paid Sick Leave', stated that half of all working Mothers who do stay home with children when they are sick report that that they do not get paid when they take the time off. A Forbes Magazine article on workers rights in 2009 stated that nearly 49% of women report that they have lost pay or promotions or have struggled to keep their jobs because of the need to care for sick children. That same report stated that job losses among low-income women are most frequently reported to be the result of the birth or illness of a child.

In addition to caring for children, women make up over two thirds of the adults providing substantial assistance to aging parents, averaging 23 hours a week providing care. Often women who provide care for aging parents must take huge cuts in time and pay to provide their parents with help. As Vermont and the rest of the country ages the need for caregivers grows. Too often I have seen some of my friends devote years of their lives to caring for their parents, and then find they have put their own financial

future at risk because of the need to work fewer hours or work at a job that pays less but give them more flexibility.

There is one final statistic I want to share that bothers me in so many ways. In their 2013 study about “Valuing Good Health in Vermont, The Costs and Benefits of Earned Health Care Time”, the Institute for Women’s Policy Research stated that there are an estimated **4400 births and adoptions each year to women employed in Vermont, and about 800 of those women currently lack paid vacation and sick leave.** What happens to these Mothers and their children when the inevitable illness arrives and they must face the choice between caring for the child or working?

A few years ago my son got a job as a para-educator at our local middle school. Within weeks of starting the fall semester he had picked up a miserable cold bug from one of the kids at school. He wasn’t alone. Kids, teachers, and administrators were all hit. The yearly cycle of sick kids and sick teachers began early that year, it was a good year to be a substitute teacher, but a bad year to be a parent without access to paid sick days at work.

If that child’s parents had paid sick days, they would have been 20 percent less likely to send a sick child to school. When parents can care for their sick children at home, the kids get better sooner and reduce the risk of spreading the illness to their classmates. According to a 2008 study conducted by the University of Vermont Medical School that looked at the correlation between paid sick time and Vermont’s elementary school population, Vermont parents with paid time off are 5 times more likely to take time off from work to care for a sick child and 15% more likely to have taken their child to the doctor’s within the past year. This is how paid sick day legislation strengthens families, by providing them an opportunity to be a good parent and a good employee and stay home and care for their sick

children and not worry about losing their jobs or losing pay. If these kids are staying at home when ill they are breaking the cycle of sick kids, sick teachers. Then we have schools where students are ready to learn and teachers are healthy enough to teach. Similarly, workers who are able to take time off when they are sick, or when a family member is sick, are more productive. For their boss that means less turnover and more efficiency. For Vermont it means more families who are economically secure and productive which in turn strengthens our economy.

This winter I traveled around Vermont and photographed business owners who supported Vermont's legislation. Those photographs were used as postcards in the Paid Sick Day Coalition campaign. The owners I met saw providing earned or paid sick day benefits for their employees as a win/win for both the employee and employer. Randy George of Red Hen Bakery found that giving his employees paid sick days resulted in higher loyalty and dedication to the employer. Employees felt they had a job where there was growth potential and support. Randy found he was able to attract a higher quality of applicants and increase retention. As his wife and co-owner Lizz Cain said, "First of all," says Liza, "we're making food, and people can't be making food when they're sick. We feel that they'll also get well faster, so in the long run, it pays off for us. And as parents, we recognize that the entire family is part of the picture." Mark Curran, co-owner of Black River Produce put it even more succinctly, "What is good for my employees, is good for my business."

Paid sick day policies are good for Mark's and Randy's businesses, and they are good for Vermont's families, and therefore good for Vermont's economy and well being. I would ask the Council to please consider supporting paid sick day legislation when it is introduced next legislative session. Thank you for your time.