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Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify on the issue of paid sick leave.

My name is Burton Wilcke. I am on the board of the Vermont Public Health Association. The Vermont Public Health Association is a member organization that subscribes to the Institute of Medicine's definition of public health which states that "Public health is what we, as a society, do collectively to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy." We strongly support assuring the conditions for all Vermonters to be healthy and to stay healthy.

Martin Luther King said "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health is the most shocking and the most inhumane". We believe that having the availability of earned sick leave is, at its core, a public health issue and that assuring its availability is the equitable, just and humane thing to do. We have formally adopted a policy position on earned sick leave which I have attached to this testimony.

We know that individuals who do not have paid sick leave are more likely, when they are sick and potentially contagious, to go to work anyway. They do that because they are concerned that being absent from work will cause them to lose wages or worse to lose their job. If going to work sick only affected them that would be bad enough, but by going to work sick they also put their co-workers and potentially the general public at risk of exposure. A recent publication in the American Journal of Public Health found that the provision of paid sick leave could reduce the number of workplace-acquired cases of influenza by as much as 40%.

Several years ago I mentored a group of University of Vermont medical students who conducted a study of Vermont parents with young children. They looked at parents who had paid sick leave and those who did not. They found that even when their children had symptoms like cough, sore throat and fever, those parents without sick leave were more likely to send their children to school anyway. Furthermore the medical students determined that not having sick leave reduced the likelihood that parents would take their children to medical providers for regular visits including visits for preventive services. This last observation was also a finding in a 2012 published study in the BMC Public Health journal. The researchers found that a significantly lower number of those workers without paid sick leave availed themselves of recommended preventive services such as mammograms, Pap tests, and colon cancer screenings.

We have a number of serious public health threats that are exacerbated by the lack of the availability of sick leave. These threats include, but are not limited to:

Food borne illness: Food handlers should never be put in position where they feel compelled to go to work sick. This puts the public at risk and certain food borne illnesses can be quite serious and even lethal.

Antibiotic-resistant bacteria: This is a problem which continues to grow worse and having sick children attend daycare or school just increases the likelihood that children will be placed on antibiotics, inevitably leading to more resistance. Antibiotic resistance affects everyone.

Healthcare facility-acquired infections: Whether one works in a hospital, a nursing home, a medical practice or some other facility serving the young or the old, these populations are particularly vulnerable to health care-acquired infections. Ironically these are infections that could have been brought in by a sick staff member.

We at the Vermont Public Health Association are dedicated to promoting health equity. The individuals who are most likely not to have paid sick leave are those who are at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum and likely to work in the service sector. This situation of having no paid sick leave perpetuates health inequity in Vermont.

Historically, public health advances have been realized through the coordinated efforts of the community, the governmental sector, the academic sector, the health care delivery sector, and the business sector. At the heart of most public health success stories, however, has been a change in the behavior of individuals. Positive, healthy individual choices are key. It would be most ironic if we in government, the community and the business sector didn't establish the conditions for individuals to make the right choice with respect to their own health, or the health of their loved ones or their co-workers or the community at large. Clearly we are collectively not creating the conditions where people can make the right choices when we have a system that encourages them to forgo preventive health services, or to go to work sick, or to neglect the health needs of their elderly relatives, or to send their sick children to school.

For all of these reasons the Vermont Public Health Association strongly supports legislation which establishes the right to earned sick leave.

Thank you.