

In support of House bill 196 - "An Act Relating to Paid Family Leave"

I joined the nursing staff at what was then Fletcher Allen Health Care in 2012. Going about my daily care for seriously ill Vermonters, I quickly became aware of how one diagnosis can send an entire family's life into disarray. I also noticed how difficult it was for family members to take care of the patient directly. The loss of the patient's income doubled with the potential loss of income and health insurance from the caregiver was just too much to bear. Unfortunately, placing loved ones in subacute rehab facilities and nursing homes became the impossible and heartbreaking reality. I ask every member of this Committee to think about their aging parents, or perhaps a loved one with cancer or heart disease. Wouldn't you want the choice to take a few months off from work in order to provide care in your home for your wife, husband, parents, or child? Paid family and medical leave is not just a suggestion of a new tax that should be easily brushed away from the public's attention. Vermonters should be able to take care of each other without fear of bankruptcy, job loss, and termination of crucial health benefits. This is a moral issue.

In January of last year, I had a baby. What should have been a joyous occasion was marred by health complications to no fault of my own. My husband and I carefully planned and saved for my maternity leave for over a year, but we could not have expected that both of us would be needed at home as my health was quite poor afterward. My husband's employer does not offer any leave beyond what is legally required, and we would have lost our health insurance had he resigned. Like many new parents before us, we made the difficult choice to have my husband return to work one week after our son was born, leaving me to try to heal on my own while caring for our son. I ask this Committee to envision a sick and traumatized new mother, who had done everything "right" to have a maternity leave free of so-called "taxpayer subsidy", trying to care for a newborn alone. This is a moral issue.

I share with you my deeply personal experiences because this bill needs a face. It needs us to stop suffering in silence and ask our elected officials for the support we deserve. Additionally, our children are suffering when their parents are not present to nurture and raise them in low-stress homes that they too deserve. Vermonters will pay dearly if we do not open our eyes and see this unsustainable situation for what it is. No longer do we live in a society where grandparents are readily available to help - they are still working into their 60s and 70s to make ends meet. No longer do we have a cost of living where a mother can choose to be a homemaker, making maternity leave a nonissue. No longer do we have a health system in which patients can remain hospitalized to truly recover from illness - they are given discharge instructions or a nursing home placement after a two day admission. This is a moral issue.

I am tired of politicians getting themselves elected on the basis of "helping the middle class" or "fighting for our rights". It is time for you all to do it. If you are unmoved by what I had to say, then perhaps consider that other states have enacted similar legislation without the perceived economic collapse that uninformed critics suggest. In California, 90% of businesses polled said California's paid leave law had a neutral or positive effect on their bottom lines. Having a parent at home frees up scarce space in child cares at a time of critical shortages. Keeping sick and elderly Vermonters out of nursing homes and rehab centers saves precious health care dollars. Additionally, we must acknowledge that Vermont needs young, tax-paying families to shore up its budget. Why wouldn't we want to attract, retain, and encourage young people to grow their families here with the support they need?

Get this bill to a vote. Ensure it is passed. Admonish our Governor for his cruel comments that he “doesn’t think much” of paid family leave. All of you will need the benefits of this bill at some time in your lives, if not already. Be thankful that you helped the bill pass when (not if) that time comes. I thank the Committee for hearing my voice as a registered nurse, a mother, and most importantly a citizen who truly cares about the well-being of my neighbors and fellow Vermonters.