

Testimony for the House General Committee

Topic: Paid Family/Medical Leave

March 3, 2017

My name is Johanna Straavaldsen and I am here today to speak with you about my experience returning to work after the births of my two children.

My oldest child, my son, was born in January 2012. At the time, I had been a full-time employee at a non-profit for a year and a half. While my employer was supportive of my pregnancy, the organization did not offer any paid family leave. As a result, the plan that my husband and I cobbled together included using all accrued vacation and sick time available to me which amounted to three and a half weeks paid time off after Elliot's birth. Our family could not afford for me to take additional unpaid leave time.

After his birth, I struggled emotionally and physically. I developed postpartum depression while still in the hospital, and the depressive and anxious feelings grew over time, especially as I got closer and closer to the end of my time off of work. I was not sleeping, crying throughout the day, and—while I was consumed by obsessive and terrifying thoughts about my newborn's well-being and safety—I felt unable to bond or connect with him. We struggled—and ultimately failed—to breastfeed. The weeks and months after his birth were some of the worst of my life.

Without the need to return to work three short weeks after Elliot's birth, I would have had the time and space to heal physically from his birth as well as get the help and support that I needed to recover from my postpartum depression. Instead, I know that Elliot's start in life was far from ideal. I know that my mental health affected my ability to form an attachment with him and I know—both from what I see in his behavior now, five years later, and what the research so clearly points out for us—that this will continue to impact him and his development into the future. It will impact his self-esteem, his relationships, and possibly even his success as an adult. I do not want this for him or for any child and I do not believe that Vermont does either.

Like any parent, I would do almost anything for my children. I look back at the weeks and months after Elliot was born and feel extraordinary guilt. I think through what happened and what I could have done differently. I tell myself that I should have just taken unpaid leave from work—that I should have done anything and everything to prioritize my family's health and well-being. But I also recognize that my family, like so many others, was put into a nearly impossible situation at one of the most vulnerable times in our lives. Our financial situation did not allow me to take unpaid time off of work. While I knew then, as I know now, that returning to work three and a half weeks after my child's birth was detrimental to my and my child's health, a lack of paid family leave left us no choice.

I would like for my children to grow up living in a state in which children and families' health and well-being are prioritized and the birth of a child or an illness or other medical issue does not represent a devastating loss of income.

I appreciate your time today. Thank you for listening to my story.