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House Ways and Means Committee Written Testimony re: H. 196

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 the Legislature to think about their aging parents, or perhaps a loved one with cancer or heart disease. Wouldn't you want 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 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.

In January of last year, I had a baby. What should have been a joyous occasion was marred by health complications at 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 paid FMLA, 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 you to picture a sick and traumatized new mother, who had done everything possible to have a maternity leave free of so-called "taxpayer subsidy", trying to care for a newborn alone.

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.

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. Having a parent at home frees up scarce space in child care centers 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?

The Governor claims there are businesses "on the edge" of collapse in Vermont, and a new 0.5% tax on them is impossible. I have called and written the Governor several times, asking him to identify these businesses and identify who has been lobbying his office against this bill. He has not responded truthfully and instead had a staffer tell me to pose those questions to the Vermont Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber declined to answer as well. I do not think they can answer because no such "on the edge" businesses exist. Businesses in high tax states like California and New Jersey are still open despite their state-run paid family leave systems. After California's system was enacted, 90% of the state's businesses said paid leave had either a neutral or positive effect on their bottom lines [statistic pulled from NPR]. Governor Scott's fear mongering about a potential collapse of the business community in Vermont simply because of paid leave is just plain wrong.

Governor Scott apparently thinks a better use of our tax dollars is corporate welfare, to the tune of \$3.5 million dollars (and counting) to GlobalFoundries, a company whose CEO is one of the highest paid people in the ENTIRE country. The Vermont Enterprise Fund has given away over \$1.7 million dollars to other businesses in the state too, yet the Governor still claims they are "on the edge"? Additionally, keep in mind that nationwide businesses like Walmart, Ford Motors, Dunkin Donuts, GE, etc. have all maintained their huge profit margins while operating in states that already have paid family and medical 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 Ways and Means 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.