



To: Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs
From: Christina Fornaciari, Consumer Advocate, VPIRG
Date: Tuesday, April 10th, 2018
Re: Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program

My name is Christina Fornaciari, and I am a consumer advocate with VPIRG, the Vermont Public Interest Research Group. VPIRG is the state's largest public interest advocacy organization, with over 50,000 members and supporters from throughout Vermont. I am speaking in support of H.196, a paid family and medical leave insurance program for Vermont.

For more than 45 years, our mission has been to protect and promote the health and wellbeing of Vermont's people, environment, and locally-based economy. To that end, we have fought for Vermont's families, particularly through the lens of consumer protection; for example, protecting children from unsafe toys or expanding access to oral health care. It has become increasingly clear, however, that there is more that can and should be done for those among us who are living one paycheck away from financial insecurity.

We believe that it is simply wrong to force hardworking Vermonters to choose between taking care of a loved one, and keeping their job. This is especially true when it doesn't need to be this way – dozens of other countries around the globe, from Canada to Indonesia, have instituted paid family and medical leave programs. VPIRG supports H.196, the paid family and medical leave bill, because it promotes basic economic fairness and financial security for all Vermonters. For our state to prosper, working Vermonters need to prosper, and we believe that this legislation brings us one step closer to a just system of financial fairness.

Millions of Americans face this dilemma: an elderly parent falls ill, or you and your partner are having a child, and you need to take some time off of work. It's always difficult to take time off, especially when it's to deal with a serious sickness or injury. But the real dilemma comes when, for example, workers are forced to choose between their job, and bonding with and caring for their newborn child. This is not a question Vermonters should have to ask during such a time of need, nor is it one that they want to: the majority of Vermont adults want the state to implement some form of paid family leave, according to polls.¹

It should not come as a surprise that women tend to bear the brunt of this dilemma, since it is women who give birth and more often take on the role of primary caregiver for children and other family members.² But it is now 2018, and the majority of women work outside the home – they are major contributors to, and drivers of, our economy – so we cannot expect them to abandon their jobs to care

¹http://women.vermont.gov/sites/women/files/pdf/VT%20PFML%20Study_Final%20Report_FINAL_V3.pdf

²<https://www.caregiver.org/women-and-caregiving-facts-and-figures>

for their families, nor should we want them to. Economically, unpaid leave can be devastating: over forty percent of bankruptcies in the U.S. are the result of income lost due to the illness or injury of the employee or their family member.³

At the same time, we know that fathers who are able to take leave following childbirth are more likely to be involved with their children later on, which in turn contributes to child development and success. Despite this need for the increased involvement of fathers in parenting, the fact is, our society still typically overlooks the right of men to parenthood, by not providing leave time or assuming that they would or should not use it.⁴ As we talk about issues of gender and equity, these are points to consider.

We know that in order for the state to flourish, we need to strengthen our families and communities, and make Vermont more attractive to families and young workers. This is what Vermonters want and need, and this is what H.196 helps to accomplish.

Given that the United States is one of the last countries in the world to adopt paid family and medical leave policies, we have a lot of evidence to show the benefits. For instance, research has shown that such policies can have a wide range of positive effects, including: keeping women in the workforce, providing financial support for low income families, improving child and mother's health, supporting paternal involvement in the care of newborns, and providing a competitive edge for small businesses.

The specific quantitative and qualitative benefits to Vermont are laid out in detail in the feasibility report published by the Vermont Commission on Women, which makes clear that what's good for individuals is good for the state. An average annual savings of \$1,032 to \$1,747 per family resulting from reduced child care costs translates into more direct family care, better health for infants, and reduced reliance on public assistance.⁵

In these difficult times, we have an excellent opportunity to stand out and attract working families who are searching for a state that is receptive to those prioritizing the balance of work and life. H.196 is a step in the right direction in presenting a program that is affordable and accessible for employees and employers.

As you consider this legislation, I urge you strengthen it to include 12 weeks of paid leave at 100% wage replacement up to a cap of two-times the livable wage. , We look forward to continuing conversations around this critical policy moving forward.

Thank you for your consideration of this important bill.

³ <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/reports/2014ExternalReports/296055.pdf>

⁴ http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_242615.pdf

⁵ http://women.vermont.gov/sites/women/files/pdf/VT%20PFML%20Study_Final%20Report_FINAL_V3.pdf