

**Statement to the Vermont House Committee on Government Operations**  
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I'm Jean Sinzdak, associate director of the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. For nearly 50 years, CAWP has been monitoring and analyzing women's status and prospects in American politics, tracking the numbers of women candidates and officeholders as well as conducting research about the impact of women serving in elected positions. I'm testifying today in support of House Bill 619, an act permitting candidate expenditures for childcare costs.

Democratic ideals call for full citizen participation in political life, and those ideals demand an examination of the barriers to entry for all citizens, and a keen focus on leveling the playing field. In the interest of ensuring participation by as many citizens as possible and ensuring that a full range of perspectives and life experiences are present at policymaking tables, working to eliminate barriers to entry is a laudable and important goal.

We all know that women are more than half the nation's population, and on that basis alone, the paucity of elected women is a problem. In spite of the progress we've seen in recent years, women are still significantly underrepresented in government. Our Center's data shows that, despite recent gains, women hold only one in four seats in Congress, only nine governorships out of 50, less than a third of seats in statehouses nationwide, and are less than a quarter of mayors in cities above 30,000 in population. In Vermont, women are doing better than the national average in the statehouse, holding 40% of state legislative seats (5th in the nation), but unfortunately it remains the only state that has never sent a woman to either the US Senate or House. Only one of six statewide elected positions is currently held by a woman. While Vermont has done better than many states at the state legislative level, it still fails to represent women near their proportions in the population.

As the members of this committee and every elected official knows, campaigning is time-consuming and labor-intensive. For anyone considering a run for office, the decision to run involves weighing out various factors to determine whether public service is feasible. In many cases, potential candidates may choose to forgo a run because of personal or professional responsibilities. While this is often a reasonable choice, in some cases the barriers are preventable.

One of the biggest barriers to entry for candidates with young children is the cost of childcare. Childcare is enormously expensive in the United States, and at a time when wages have stagnated, childcare costs have grown exponentially (per-child spending on childcare grew by a factor of 21 between the 1970s and 2000s, according to one study by Sabino Kornrich of the University of Sydney and Frank Furstenburg of the University of Pennsylvania, according to one study). Women disproportionately shoulder the burden for childcare responsibilities; research shows that women still spend twice as much time on childcare as men do. In addition, a recent survey of women voters found that the top reason for women not getting involved in politics was that they were too busy working or taking care of their families.

In addition to gender, this barrier is a class issue. Research by Duke University professor Nicholas Carnes shows that “working class” individuals – those in manual labor, service industry and clerical jobs – are less likely to run for public office because they do not have the financial resources to spend months in the unpaid job of running for office, and that working class individuals make up less than 3 percent of the typical state legislature and 2 percent of members of Congress. While this will more immediately affect women candidates, policies allowing candidates to use their campaign funds for campaign-related childcare removes a barrier to participation for parents of young children – both women and men – who want to run for office but might be deterred because of the burden of additional childcare costs. It also removes a barrier for lower-income candidates who do not have the disposable income or other financial resources to easily mount a campaign, and for single parents who do not have a partner or spouse to share the childcare burden.

For context, a national conversation on allowing the use of campaign funds for campaign-related childcare was jumpstarted by a Federal Elections Commission ruling in 2018, in response to a request from then-Congressional candidate Liuba Grechen Shirley. The FEC approved Shirley’s request to use her campaign funds for campaign-related childcare needs, stating “The Commission concludes that your authorized campaign committee may use campaign funds to pay for the childcare expenses described in your request because such expenses would not exist irrespective of your candidacy.” The FEC issued a similar ruling the following year approving the use of childcare funds in a different candidate’s request. In both rulings, the FEC noted that the rulings applied only to the specific case at hand and that because regulations do not specifically address the use of childcare in campaign funds, each case must be decided on a case-by-case basis. Relatedly, in March 2019, US Representative Katie Porter introduced the "Help America Run Act" to codify this practice into law for federal candidates. It passed the US House and is currently sitting in committee in the US Senate.

The Shirley ruling in 2018 spurred several state-level candidates to seek clarity on the rules regarding campaign funds and childcare expenses in their states. Both legislative and administrative channels have been employed to expand access to the use of campaign funding for relevant childcare expenses. To date, 17 states allow or have allowed the practice of using campaign funds for campaign-related childcare. Six states have enshrined the practice into law (Minnesota, Utah, Colorado, New York, New Hampshire, and California), while the other states allow it administratively through the relevant elections boards or commissions. A handful of other states have bills pending in their legislatures or are expected to introduce bills this year, including Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Ohio, and Rhode Island. Most advisory opinions issued by commissions note that state law does not specifically address the issue, and some opinions encourage the legislature to take the matter on and formally enshrine the practice into law. Similar to the federal situation, it is important that the practice be addressed legislatively to remove ambiguity.

To reiterate, the strength of democratic governments rests on citizen participation, so all efforts to remove obstacles to participation and allow more voices at policymaking tables are critical. We are all better off when there are more voices and diverse perspectives at the table. Making policy changes designed to broaden the pool of potential candidates will only strengthen the work of government.

I am happy to answer any questions. Thank you to this committee for allowing me to testify in support of House Bill 619. I encourage you to approve this bill and pass it out of committee.