

3/19/2019

Dear Chairperson Ancel, Vice Chairperson Canfield, and members of the House Committee on Ways and Means:

Thank you for all of your hard work to create a paid family and medical leave insurance program that will benefit every working Vermonter during their lifetimes. I am writing today to urge the Committee to pass a version of H.107 that protects the highest level of benefits possible. It is so important to make sure that any program that is created has benefits that are strong enough that it remains accessible to working Vermonters who would otherwise not be able to use the program with lower benefit levels.

I want to share the impact that a program like this would have on me and my clients in my work in affordable housing in Addison County. For many of us whose incomes just barely or don't even cover our living expenses, it is impossible to save for time off from work for medical care, caring for our loved ones who need medical care, or after childbirth or adoption. A program like this would need to provide as close to 100% of what we earn normally in order for us to be able to make use of it, and the amount of time available for paid leave to be as long as possible, so that we don't face the choice between being there for our family members or fully healing from an illness, or losing a job.

Six years ago, my husband and I found out that we were expecting—twins!—and due to medical complications, I was unable to continue working.

At a time when we should have been celebrating and focusing on the arrival of our children, we were stressed about paying bills while I was out of work, he was overworked, and we worried constantly about what the future would bring. It was impossible to build up any sort of savings, so the day after we came home from the hospital, my husband returned to work. We could only afford for him to miss three days of work for the birth of our children.

No one should have to make this choice, yet there are countless people like me here in Vermont grappling with the same, dire dilemma. In fact, 71 percent of voters across the country say they too worry that a new child or serious illness could mean significant financial hardship.

When my husband returned to work, I was catapulted into a new life with our older daughter and two helpless infants. I was largely alone while my husband continued working long hours. The baby blues soon took a darker and deeper tone, I became so entrenched in guilt, exhaustion, sadness and anxiety that it consumed me. I had postpartum depression and anxiety.

Thankfully, my husband got a new job with a better wage and a 40-hour workweek, but most importantly—additional time at home. He was no longer the stranger who left before our children woke up and returned after they went to bed. He was finally given the opportunity to fully bond with his children. Laughter and joy returned to our home, and I am convinced that if I had had

this full support after the birth of our children that it could have helped prevent postpartum depression. Having time to spend together as a family was literally a lifesaver. This should be the norm, not the exception for families in Vermont - whether its a difficult pregnancy, postpartum depression, a wounded warrior, an elderly parent or relative, or a sick loved one.

Far too often, workers across this state are forced to choose between keeping their jobs and taking care of themselves or providing care to a loved one. I see this frequently in my work as a housing manager for my local affordable housing trust, and it is a huge barrier that keeps people in poverty.

Paid family and medical leave is central to addressing the struggles of Vermont workers and their ability to care for themselves and their families, and the system should be shored up and made as strong as possible. I have heard that you are considering many proposals for how to set the benefit level for the family and medical leave program. My hope is that you would place those who would be indirectly excluded from the program at the center of your decision making process.

Thank you,
Jubilee McGill
Bridport, VT