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My name is Amber Hewston. I am a resident of Wilder and a mother of two who experienced the value of paid leave. I am writing to request that Vermont lawmakers include \$37 million in one-time funds for universal, state-run paid family and medical leave program start-up costs in the FY2025 state budget.

Paid leave after the birth of each of my children afforded me time I could never get back. Time to physically recover from pregnancy and birth. Time to go to important well-baby visits, so my infants got a healthy start. Time to learn about my children and their cues, personalities, needs, and how they fit into our family.

Having a paid leave policy that protected my job and my financial stability meant that I was physically and mentally ready to return to work when I did.

In my career as an Early Intervention Physical Therapist, I see many families who do not have the supportive experience I did. I often work with clients who are returning to work while coming to grips with being a new parent – and in some cases, a parent of a child with significant needs.

Some have had traumatic birth experiences. Some are juggling frequent medical appointments or must return to work before their child has even left the hospital.

As children get older, many families are still faced with lack of paid or even unpaid leave when their child has life-altering medical procedures. Families are forced to make difficult decisions that can put themselves or their child at unnecessary risk, like having to delay medical treatment or being unable to attend important follow-up appointments. This can lead to poor health outcomes for the child and add additional stress and mental health strain for caregivers.

The pressure of being a full-time worker and full-time caregiver without support can force parents to leave the workforce altogether. “Lucky” ones may only sacrifice career aspirations they have worked years to develop. Others may experience financial hardship that puts themselves and their children at further risk.

Paid leave gives growing families a strong start – and when families have a strong start, we all benefit.

When parents can attend to a child’s early medical needs, it reduces the occurrence and length of childhood illnesses. When caregivers can balance the demands of their career and their family, they stay in the workforce. Investing in the health of Vermont’s children and caregivers builds stronger communities and saves taxpayer dollars.

Please fund the start-up costs for a universal, state-run paid family and medical leave program, like H.66, with \$37 million in one-time funds. Thank you.