

SGO Testimony 2/15/23

Legislator Compensation

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on S.39 and the legislative compensation system. I would like to share my legislator story briefly and then make **3 core points** in support of S.39. I would also like to share a handout that shares a couple of additional ideas within my House bill on legislator compensation being introduced today.

Background

- 3 and 7 year old children
- Self employed consultant - dependent on clients and cyclical nature of client work every year; it allows great flexibility (which is critical for legislator work), but unpredictable at times
- Married to a wife who has a good public sector job that offers health insurance, decent salary, and also a demanding work schedule as the Division Director for the Water, Wastewater and Stormwater Division of the City of Burlington.
- Typical moderate income family in modern day Vermont where we both need to work full time (me, 2 full time jobs at times) to afford to live in VT and raise two kids
- To make this all work, I carry at least 2 clients during the session and then increase clients off session. Overall I average at least 1.5 FTE during the year (conservative estimate). We also take on additional after hour child care expenses to allow me to be in Montpelier for extended work days.

#1 Unpaid Labor

- Legislators do a lot of unpaid labor off session.
- **Two images 2021 and 2022.** In 2022 I consciously decided to not attend advocacy organization meetings and guard my time because it was unpaid time and I had limited capacity.
- **Complexity of policy making** and policy needs in modern day Vermont is challenging.
- **Thoughtful policy, good work.** To do this job well to develop thoughtful policy requires preparation, research, meeting with advocates and constituents off session on bills
- **Constituents.** Also need to do constituent services all year round
- **Tracking implementation.** Also tracking policy off session with implementation and/or special committee work (whether you are on a committee or not). Ex: Unemployment special committee (3-4 meetings unpaid).

#2 Inequitable Reimbursement System

- Housing, meals and mileage during session only
- Does not extend to members for meetings off session unless you are assigned a special committee
- Current housing reimbursement is a flat fee so those able to stay here and find a different housing rate can pocket the difference. Those who have obligations at home do not have that access to additional income (child or dependent care).

- Serving in the legislature brings on additional costs for people with children and dependents to serve the long hours with no opportunity for reimbursement/support.
- Also, parking expenses for people with mobility issues.

Child Care

3 year old. Toddler care (with Act 166) -\$810 - **\$40.50/day \$162 for legislative week** (without is more like \$1100 or \$55/day \$220/week)

7 year old. After School care (\$25/day) - **\$100 for a legislative week**

Extra babysitting 5-7:30pm Tue-Thur - \$45/day (\$18/hr) - **\$135/week**

Child care totals \$7,146 for my two children during the legislative session (18 weeks) to allow me to serve. (4 days a week). That is almost half (49%) of my legislator salary (\$14,600).

#3 Inequitable Economics and Member Well Being Choices

- Necessity of working a second job, inability to do either job well during session and off session
- Need other income to subsidize legislator pay - a partner/spouse or other income
- Reliance on health insurance of a partner, especially if have children
- Reliance on a partner for sharing child care duties (otherwise would be completely logistically and economically prohibitive to serve as a legislator)
- Impacts of low wage and those on subsidies - the legislature has created a benefits cliff
- Economic inequities related to political realities of the job and what chamber you serve in (size of body) - assigned off session committees or not (paid or not)

Opportunity for Changes

- **Salary system would create a fairer compensation system** to reflect the real work we do off session and remove the inequities created based on policial assignments made during off session work
- **Increasing compensation would expand the possibility for other working Vermonters** to consider serving in the legislature without sacrificing their mental or economic well being **AND** improve the mental and economic well being of current members (this is not insignificant, Rep. Kate Donnelly).
- **The intention of the current compensation system has outlived its relevance in modern times.** The idea that you can step away from work for 4 days a week and not experience economic hardship if you are a low to moderate income working Vermonter is not true anymore.

The system was built to support a very different looking legislature - economically privileged households and members who were not the primary caregivers as they had another family member at home able to care for children and not work out of the home. And this has also favored older, white men as we look at the walls of this building. This is

not a representative democracy.

- **Choosing economics over public service.** We miss out on the best and brightest VT has to offer as well as other demographics which would make this building look more like the communities we all live in. a
- **Low pay coupled with the targeting of minoritized identities** (queer and people of global majority) make this even less likely to be a diverse body. Is it really worth it?