



H.461 - An act relating to expanding employee access to unpaid leave

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March 13, 2025

My name is Anne Ward and I have served as Executive Director of Mosaic Vermont since 2018. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.461, which would expand Vermont workers access to unpaid, job-protected leave, including safe leave.

Mosaic is the sexual violence prevention and response agency in Washington County. In the past five years, Mosaic has provided over 20,500 services, including caring for over 350 children and youth who have experienced sexual violence. Often the first responders following harm, we support safety, information sharing, choice and consent, and work to meet the individual needs of each survivor.

Survivors deserve time to heal, access support, and seek safety for themselves and their children without fear of losing their employment. That is why I strongly support providing 12 weeks of unpaid safe leave for survivors of domestic violence, sexual violence, and stalking.

H.461 would improve survivors' access to safety planning, mental health resources, medical care, and the criminal legal system. This would benefit the survivors we serve at Mosaic.

When 12 year old Emma (name changed) first told a trusted adult about the bad things that were happening to her, she just wanted them to stop. She didn't know about mandated reporters and that kids and parents don't get a choice about whether to participate in the law enforcement system in Vermont.

Emma's mom took time off work to take her to a Sexual Assault Nurse Examination, multiple visits to forensic interviews, meetings with advocates, lawyers, and the State's Attorney, court hearings, therapy, and much more. Emma's mom had to take additional time off work to field phone calls and meet individually with the therapists, attorneys, and Emma's school. She did all of this while trying to support Emma in getting her own needs met and finding the support that she needed as a parent.

When people have experienced this trauma, the very least we can do as a state is give their caregiver the opportunity to be with their child, supporting them, without risking their employment.

Additionally, I wanted to speak in support of the inclusive family definition included in H.461. This change would better align Vermont's unpaid leave laws with the reality of Vermont families. I know, from both my role at Mosaic and as a foster parent, that children form deeply important relationships with caregivers outside of a nuclear family structure.

For many children, including those who have experienced violence in their home, their primary caregiver may not be their legal or biological parent. These relationships can be a lifeline for children and it is essential their value is reflected in our statutes.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of H.461 and for your attention to support for survivors in Vermont.