



**Testimony of Gretchen Elias, Coalition Manager, Vermont Paid Leave Coalition
House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs
Thursday, April 16, 2026**

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today about Vermonters' access to paid family and medical leave. My name is Gretchen Elias. I represent the Vermont Paid Leave Coalition. We are a group of more than 80 businesses, organizations, and everyday Vermonters who believe that nobody should have to choose between making a living and caring for themselves or a loved one.

The evidence is clear: universal access to paid family and medical leave benefits everyone. Families who have access to paid leave are healthier, more economically secure, and less likely to require taxpayer-funded public assistance resources.¹ Access to paid leave is good for the economy too. It increases labor force participation among new parents, people with chronic illnesses, and caregivers for older adults. For these reasons, 14 states have already passed a universal paid leave program, including nearly every one of Vermont's neighbors.²

Vermonters want paid leave. Around 80% of Vermonters support the idea of a universal, state administered paid leave program. We've come close to making that happen several times, and the Governor has vetoed it, opting instead for the voluntary coverage approach the state implemented beginning in 2023.

As a result, State employees now have access to a partial paid leave benefit. While we have some questions about how this benefit is actually working for State employees, what I want to address today is how this voluntary approach is working for the remainder of Vermont's workers. What does this mean for them?

In theory, it means that their employers could choose to provide this benefit by contracting directly with The Hartford. This option became available to employers in 2024. Likewise, individual Vermonters who don't have a paid leave benefit through their employer can now choose to buy this benefit directly from The Hartford. This option became available in 2025, with a month-long enrollment period in May.

Voluntary Approach Shows Low Enrollment and Limited Impact Thus Far

Predictably, the voluntary approach to partial paid leave has had limited impact on Vermonters' access to paid leave:

¹ <https://www.abetterbalance.org/resources/the-u-s-needs-paid-family-and-medical-leave/>

² States with a universal program: Maine, New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Maryland, Virginia, Minnesota, California, Oregon, Colorado, and the District of Columbia.

- **Only 63 of Vermont’s roughly 17,000 private sector employers have chosen to offer paid leave** to their employees through The Hartford.
- **That represents just 1800 additional employees covered.** This is 0.6% of the private sector workforce, or a fraction of one percent. With nearly 70% of the workforce lacking access, this is a glacial pace in terms of expanding access.³
- **The same is true for individual enrollment;** during the one-month enrollment period in 2025, 67 Vermonters purchased paid leave from The Hartford. That’s a tiny fraction of the workers who likely need this benefit, either because they are self-employed or contractual workers or because they are employed by a business that doesn’t offer paid leave⁴. And these workers won’t have another opportunity until May of 2026.

That’s what happened to Karyn Mowery from Hartford, Vermont, who shared her experience in a recent [letter](#) to the Valley News:

A trip to the ER this past summer because my husband wasn’t feeling well turned into immediate surgery as a result of a cancer diagnosis. Our family soon learned about the gaps in Vermont’s paid leave coverage that cause many families to scramble to patch together care and financial resources.

I remember when I heard on the news that there was a paid leave program in Vermont, I immediately thought of a co-worker of mine who had spent the last couple years balancing work, PTO and unpaid FMLA while caring for her husband. I thought that would be a great resource for her, never thinking that I’d be in the same boat.

I was told that I could sign up as an individual under Vermont’s voluntary plan on the Hartford’s website. But what I discovered was that if I had wanted this coverage, I had to have signed up in May. It was now August.

So, guess what? I’m not covered and out of luck until next year! The Hartford’s rep couldn’t even tell me what the premium might be if I did sign up because I wasn’t eligible at the time.

Voluntary Employer Participation Leads To Inadequate Benefits

A key difference between the voluntary approach taken by Vermont and the comprehensive program offered by 14 other states, is that in Vermont, the benefit is offered as a commercial insurance product that employers purchase on the private market. Each employer negotiates directly with The Hartford to purchase the product and set eligibility terms. This means that the specific benefit provided can look very different from employer to employer. For example, an employer can:

- Require a waiting period of 6 months or more before the employee becomes eligible;
- Require a ‘benefit elimination period’ which acts like a deductible - a period of time after the qualifying event during which the employee has to take unpaid leave before they can access paid leave.
- Choose to offer it as an optional benefit - one that employees can opt into or decline.

³ <https://nationalpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/paid-leave-means-a-stronger-vermont.pdf>

⁴ In 2025, Vermont had an estimated 26,000 self-employed workers and 64,000 sole proprietorships. See https://www.bls.gov/opub/geographic-profile/home.htm#gp24_21.f.1 and https://advocacy.sba.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Vermont_2025-State-Profile.pdf.

- Choose to offer only bonding leave and not caregiving for sick or dying loved ones.
- Choose whether or not the benefit qualifies for job protection under PFLA or FMLA
- Choose whether it can be combined with other benefits to fully replace the worker's wages during leave.⁵

Commonly, this results in a benefit package that is inadequate and therefore inaccessible to those who need it most. This means that, practically speaking, paid leave may still be inaccessible even for the small fraction of workers whose employers provide a version of The Hartford's paid leave benefit. This trend is already evident in responses to a recent survey of over 700 Vermont workers conducted by medical students at UVM's Larner College of Medicine.

"The VT-FMLI only covers a percentage of salary, and could not be combined with FMLA-backed PTO to bring wages up to 100%, so it was functionally useless for our family when we had a child in early 2024. I instead burned my entire PTO leave bank and have limited time off since."

"I explored this for maternity leave. I was deeply disappointed. It pays you 60% of your income and you can't combine it with your paid time off, so unless you can survive off of 60% of your income, it is useless."

"I could have taken paid leave but cannot afford it. It only pays out 60% of my income so had to take my vacation time/sick leave instead."

"The VT Paid family and medical leave is inadequate. The process is convoluted and does not provide you more than 60% of your pay. This is critically detrimental to folks who cannot afford to lose almost 1/3 of their pay."

"It was incredibly stressful managing finances and leave to support my maternity leave, even with the FMLI benefit, as it doesn't fully cover the salary you miss."

"We had to significantly dip into savings and acquired new credit card debt to fund my leave and my husbands 6-week leave. He received 3 weeks of pay and took 3 weeks unpaid, but we couldn't afford for him to take more time off. I had a traumatic birth and my son had a birth injury - it was challenging for him to have to go back to work so soon. I'm pregnant again and expecting in February. I anticipate we'll need to take funds out of our retirement and savings accounts to fund the unpaid part of my leave, and we are struggling to figure out how we'll pay for our sons child care."

In conclusion, two years after adopting a voluntary approach, available data suggest that fewer than 2000 of Vermont's non-state workers now have better access to a paid leave benefit. And even those who do may not have a benefit that meets their needs. What's more, the low enrollment rates associated with voluntary approaches like these cannot generate a large enough pool for the

⁵ See [Employer FAQ flyer](#) on the Hartford website.

system to be affordable in the long term. A universal program in which all employers participate creates a more equitable sharing of resources among businesses of all sizes.⁶

Lessons from New Hampshire

New Hampshire is the only other state that took a similar, voluntary purchase approach. They contracted with MetLife to provide a partial benefit to NH state employees. As of 2023 private employers and individuals could also purchase this benefit from MetLife. New Hampshire's option is somewhat more flexible than Vermont's: they allow a two-month open enrollment period for individuals per year, instead of just one. But still, less than 3% of the NH workforce has access to the benefit through MetLife. Roughly half of those workers are NH state employees. Only about 8500 private sector workers have access to the benefit out of a total workforce of roughly 700,000.⁷

New Hampshire data also shows that a voluntary benefit option won't move the needle on equity. Currently, in Vermont, the workers most likely to need paid leave are the ones least likely to have it: low-income workers, self-employed, and contractual workers. After three years of offering a voluntary benefit, the numbers in New Hampshire look the same: the workers most likely to have paid family and medical leave are those in the highest income bracket, with postgraduate degrees, and those working for the largest employers.

Evidence Supports A Strong, Public, Universal Paid Leave Program

In conclusion, the state's experiment with a voluntary leave benefit confirms what we already know: that a voluntary approach doesn't and won't meet the needs of Vermonters. That's why fourteen states and the District of Columbia have opted for a universal program. We know from their success that universal paid leave is a cost-effective way to ensure financial stability for workers, improve health outcomes for families, and help small businesses attract and retain employees. The Vermont Paid Leave Coalition will continue to advocate for a comprehensive paid family and medical leave program. Only a universal, publicly administered program will expand access to all Vermonters, especially those who need this benefit most, put small Vermont businesses on an even playing field with big companies, and make Vermont attractive for young people starting a family.

Additional Resources

⁶ Industry best practice finds that to ensure solvency, paid family and medical leave program's claims should average 5 to 7% of total enrollment annually. Voluntary programs may see annual claims rates as high as 25 to 50% due to adverse selection.

⁷ "The New Hampshire Paid Family and Medical Leave Program: Did the program increase coverage?" Professor Kristin Smith for the UNH Carsey School of Public Policy, January 2026. Downloaded 4/10/2026 at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/carsey/564/>.

“A Comprehensive Assessment of Vermont’s Paid and Family Medical Leave Environment.” Larner College of Medicine, in partnership with the American Heart Association. January 26, 2026. Submitted as a PDF with testimony.

“Do Market Options Provide Time To Care?: Evaluating Private Insurance-Based Approaches to State Paid Family Leave Access.” Jessica Mason, Vicki Shabo, and Maddie Shirley. National Partnership for Women and Families. December 2026. Submitted as a PDF with testimony.

“Benefit-Cost Analysis of a Paid Family and Medical Leave Program in Vermont.” Prenatal-To-3 Policy Impact Center, Peabody College at Vanderbilt University. October 2025. Submitted as a PDF with testimony.

[“Voluntary paid leave insurance is no substitute for comprehensive paid family and medical leave.”](#) Childs, Chandra. Economic Policy Institute. April 1, 2026.

[“The New Hampshire Paid Family and Medical Leave Program: Did the program increase coverage?”](#) Smith, Kristin. UNH Carsey School of Public Policy, January 2026.

[“Without universal paid leave, families are simply out of luck.”](#) Valley News, March 17, 2026.