

**Testimony of Cary Brown, Executive Director, Vermont Commission on Women
Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing, and General Affairs
April 23, 2025**

Re: H461, an act relating to expanding employee access to unpaid leave

Good morning. My name is Cary Brown and I'm the Executive Director of the Vermont Commission on Women. We are an independent state agency working to advance rights and opportunities for women and girls in Vermont.¹ In that capacity we:

- act as advisor and information source for legislative and executive branches and other policy makers on issues affecting women
- serve as an educational resource by conducting research, producing publications, and coordinating events
- bring together diverse groups and engage in partnerships to consider issues of gender equity
- provide information and referrals to the public on matters related to women and families

Our work is guided by a collection of policy statements that are adopted by the full Commission and periodically reviewed and updated. The policy statements that guide my testimony today have stood since 2001, and ring as true today as they did a quarter century ago:

The Vermont Commission on Women believes that women of all ages must have equal access to the benefits and privileges of Vermont's economic prosperity to ensure the present and future economic security for themselves and their families.

The Vermont Commission on Women supports legislation, policies, programs, and initiatives that promote paid parental, family, and medical leave.

While ideally Vermonters would be able to take paid time off from work when they need to care for themselves or a family member, expanding our existing unpaid leave protections is an important part of supporting people in both work and family, and making sure they are compatible.

FAMILY & MEDICAL LEAVE BENEFITS CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND ECONOMY

Benefits to children and families

Working mothers who receive job-protected leave are more likely to take at least the minimum six to eight weeks of leave that physicians recommend.² When mothers take longer leaves, their babies are

¹ Our work recognizes that gender is expansive, and we take a broadly inclusive approach to gender equity that encompasses those who identify as women in a way that is significant to them as well as anyone who has experienced marginalization, bias, or barriers due to their gender identity.

² Gomby, D., & Pei, D. (2009). Newborn Family Leave: Effects on Children, Parents, and Business. David and Lucile Packard Foundation Publication. Retrieved 9 April 2012, from http://www.packard.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/NFLA_fullreport_final.pdf

more likely to be seen by a pediatrician for immunizations and regular checkups, and they are more likely to be breastfed.³ In California, which has provided a statewide paid leave program since 2004, breastfeeding mothers who take the leave under the program continue breastfeeding for approximately twice as long as mothers who don't use the program.⁴

Sick children recover faster when they are cared for by their parents – when a parent is present, a child's hospital stay is shortened by 31 percent.⁵

Men who take two or more weeks off after their birth of their child are more involved in the direct care of their children nine months later than fathers who take no leave.⁶

Benefits to employers

New mothers who have access to paid family and medical leave work more hours than those who don't.⁷

An international study looking at the US, Great Britain, and Japan found that new mothers with access to paid parental leave were more likely to return to the workforce after having a child,⁸ and multiple studies of unpaid leave use under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act have found that it increased the likelihood of mothers returning to the employer they worked for before they had a child.⁹

An extensive survey of California employers regarding paid family and medical leave suggests that it can generate cost savings to employers by reducing turnover.¹⁰ Businesses offering paid leave see increased productivity and higher levels of employee satisfaction.¹¹

Women who use paid family leave and return to work after they have a baby are 39 percent less likely to depend on public assistance in the year following the child's birth compared to those who don't take any leave.¹²

³ Berger, L., Hill, J., & Waldfogel, J. (2005). Maternity Leave, Early Maternal Employment and Child Health and Development in the US. *The Economic Journal*, 115(501), F44.

⁴ Appelbaum, E., & Milkman, R. (2011). *Leaves That Pay: Employer and Worker Experiences with Paid Family Leave in California*. Center for Economic Policy Research Publication.

⁵ Heymann, J. (2001). *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families Are in Jeopardy - and What Can Be Done About It*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

⁶ Nepomnyaschy, L., & Waldfogel, J. (2007). Paternity Leave and Fathers' Involvement with their Young Children. *Community, Work, and Family*, 10(4).

⁷ [VT PFML Study Final Report FINAL V3.pdf](#)

⁸ Jane Waldfogel, Yoshio Higuchi and Masahiro Abe, "Family Leave Policies and Women's Retention after Childbirth: Evidence from the United States, Britain, and Japan," *Journal of Population Economics*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (November 1999)

⁹ Baum, C. L. (2003). The effects of maternity leave legislation on mothers' labor supply after childbirth. *Southern Economic Journal*, 772-799 and Hofferth, S. L. & Curtin, S.C. (2003). The impact of parental leave statutes on maternal return to work after childbirth in the United States (OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 7). Paris, France: OECD Publishing

¹⁰ Helene Jorgensen & Eileen Appelbaum, 2014. "Expanding Federal Family and Medical Leave Coverage: Who Benefits from Changes in Eligibility Requirements?," CEPR Reports and Issue Briefs 2014-02, Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR).

¹¹ Council of Economic Advisers, "The Economics of Paid and Unpaid Leave" (June 2014),

http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/leave_report_final.pdf; Institute for Women's Policy Research, "Paid Parental Leave in the United States," Barbara Gault, Heidi Hartmann, Ariane Hegewisch, Jessica Milli and Lindsey Reichlin, <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/paid-parental-leave-in-the-united-states-what-the-data-tell-us-about-access-usage-and-economic-and-health-benefits>; Center for American Progress, "The Economic Benefits of Family and Medical Leave Insurance," Heather Boushey, Ann O'Leary and Alexandra Mitukiewicz, (December 12, 2013),

¹² [VT PFML Study Final Report FINAL V3.pdf](#)

In a survey of human resources managers, two-thirds said that the most important factor in attracting and retaining employees is policies that support families and promote a health work-life balance.¹³

CAREGIVING HAS A DISPROPORTIONATE ECONOMIC IMPACT ON WOMEN

Globally, women spend 3.2 times as much time as men on unpaid care work.¹⁴

A [2022 American Time Use Survey](#) from the Pew Research Institute shows that men report spending just over 26 minutes a day caring for children, other family members and people outside of their home, whereas women average a bit under 52 minutes, meaning men only do half (51 percent) as much caregiving as women.¹⁵ This gap means that women average 25 more additional minutes of caregiving than men each day, amounting to an additional 153 hours of care annually – four full work weeks a year.¹⁶

The most recent statistics from the Vermont Department of Labor show that while women are 50% of the workforce in the state, their earnings are only 75% of men's.¹⁷ This is a much lower ratio than is often quoted for the wage gap, and this is because the higher ratio is only looking at full-time workers, whereas when part-time workers are factored in, women's earnings drop. Women are much more likely to work part-time, and much more likely to cite family caregiving responsibilities as the reason for doing so.

FEDERAL AND STATE LAW HAVE RECOGNIZED THE VALUE TO SOCIETY AND THE ECONOMY OF MAKING IT EASIER FOR PEOPLE TO BOTH WORK AND TAKE CARE OF THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILIES

The United States implemented the Family and Medical Leave Act in 1993. Vermont was ahead of the federal government in creating a similar law in 1989.

In the years since, the state law has been amended to increase access to unpaid leave: In 1991, Vermont renamed “maternity leave” to “parental and family leave” and in 1997 Vermont added short-term family leave (up to 24 hours).

H461 continues that effort to extend benefits to more people, including coverage for pregnancy, childbirth, and miscarriage.

Of particular note are the expansions in this bill of the definition of family member, and the inclusion of safe leave.

Family member definition

According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, an overwhelming majority of American households (82.2 percent) depart from the traditional nuclear family structure.¹⁸

¹³ Joan Williams, *Unbending Gender: Why Work and Family Conflict and What to Do About It* (Oxford University Press, 2001), cited in Council of Economic Advisers, “The Economics of Paid and Unpaid Leave” (June 2014)

¹⁴ ILO, [Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work](#) (2018)

¹⁵ [2022 American Time Use Survey](#)

¹⁶ [2022 American Time Use Survey](#)

¹⁷ [ELMI Earnings and Jobs by Industry and Sex - Vermont Department of Labor](#)

¹⁸ [Paid Leave Policies Must Include Chosen Family - Center for American Progress](#)

Other states have adopted expansive definitions of family in their programs:¹⁹

- In 2019, New Jersey became the [first state](#) in the nation to allow workers to take up to 12 weeks of paid family leave to care for a chosen family member.
- Washington state similarly amended [its existing paid family and medical leave law](#) to include “any individual who regularly resides in the employee’s home or where the relationship creates an expectation that the employee care for the person, and that individual depends on the employee for care.”
- [Connecticut](#) followed soon thereafter, covering chosen family members since benefits beginning in 2022.
- Chosen family coverage is also included in paid family and medical leave laws in [Oregon](#), where benefits began in September 2023, and in
- [Colorado](#), where benefits began in January 2024.

In 1994, the Federal Employees Family Friendly Leave Act enabled federal employees to use paid sick leave for family caregiving, defining family members broadly as “any individual related by blood or affinity whose close association with the employee is the equivalent of a family relationship.”²⁰

Safe leave

Vermont provides a few days of paid safe leave under the paid sick and safe days law, because we already recognize the need for people to take time off from work for needs such as relocating to safety, accessing support or legal services, or getting physical or mental health care. Extending the ability to take unpaid leave can support survivors in keeping their jobs and caring for themselves.

In one study, an overwhelming 83 percent of survivor respondents “say that intimate partner violence disrupted their ability to work,” more than half of whom, according to the study results, “lost at least one job as a result of the abuse.” If the time to relocate, speak with a lawyer, access benefits, or take other actions in pursuit of safety puts their jobs at risk, too many survivors will not be able to do so.”²¹

Maintaining employment means greater economic independence for survivors. Two-thirds of domestic violence survivors report staying longer in an abusive relationship or returning to that relationship due to financial needs, and survivors with children were more likely to report staying or returning because of financial concerns than were survivors without children.”²²

¹⁹ [Paid Leave Policies Must Include Chosen Family - Center for American Progress](#)

²⁰ <https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/reference-materials/reports/federal-employees-family-friendly-leave-act/>

²¹ [The State of Safe Leave - Center for American Progress](#)

²² [The State of Safe Leave - Center for American Progress](#)