



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

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Thank you for the invitation to speak with the committee today in support of H.461, expanding unpaid leave protection, including safe leave for survivors of domestic violence, sexual violence, and stalking.

The Vermont Network is our state's leading voice on domestic and sexual violence. Our members are 15 independent, non-profit organizations that offer direct services to survivors of violence and prevention programming in their communities. Together, they serve survivors in every town in Vermont.

On behalf of our members, the Vermont Network advocates for policies that seek to uproot the causes of violence and support the well-being of survivors, their families, and Vermont communities. That is why we're proud to support H.461.

Survivors deserve time to heal, access support, and seek safety for themselves and their children – without fear of losing their job. Creating 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected safe leave will improve survivors' access to important services, like safety planning, medical care, and the criminal legal system.

One story from Mosaic, our member organization serving survivors of sexual violence in Washington County, illustrates the importance of these protections.

Twelve-year old Emma (name changed) told a trusted adult she had experienced abuse. Emma and her family then worked to heal and navigate Vermont's criminal legal system.

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 therapists, attorneys, and Emma's school. She did all of this while trying to support Emma through this process, as well as finding the support that she needed as a parent.

The most important takeaway from this example is that, after experiencing the trauma of abuse, survivors and their caregivers should be able to get the support they need without risking their employment.

Requested Amendments

We would recommend several small changes to H.461. At the request of Chair Clarkson, I have shared these changes with legislative counsel and will provide a brief summary:

1. As passed by the House, H.461 references the criminal definitions of domestic abuse, sexual assault, and stalking.

Request: Reference the civil definition used by survivors when requesting civil protection orders, such as a relief from abuse order (or restraining order). These definitions better capture the scope of abuse.

2. Currently, victims of crime and abuse can access unpaid leave to their attend court proceedings (21 V.S.A. § 472c).

Request: Remove "unpaid leave to attend court hearings for a sexual assault or stalking protection order" from the safe leave definition in H.461, as it's already captured by existing "court leave."

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with the committee today. I would be happy to answer any questions.