

Testimony of Mary Symkowicz, Paraprofessional
East Hartford Public Schools
1st Vice President, East Hartford Federation of Para educators

HB 5465 An Act Concerning Family and Medical Leave Benefits for Certain
Municipal Employees

Labor and Public Employees Committee

February 10, 2011

Good Afternoon Senator Prague, Representative Zalaski, and Committee Members. My name is Mary Symkowicz. I have been a paraprofessional in the East Hartford Public Schools for over 19 years. I am the 1st Vice president of my union. On behalf of my fellow paraprofessionals as their colleague and representative, I would like to testify that there is a definite need for the changing of the F.M.L.A. law as currently written.

In **HB 5465** the hours one has to work to qualify for F.M.L.A. are lessened which allows paraprofessionals to qualify for it. Paraprofessionals are dedicated public school employees who work very hard and simply are not offered the hours to reach 1,250 hours, but because of their love and commitment to the children they teach and guide through our public school system, they remain loyal employees. Many are working two jobs to be able to return each Fall with much anticipation and hope to our future, the children of Connecticut.

Serving as a paraprofessional or, as my union prefers, paraeducator, more and more is expected of us. We are given training alongside our colleagues, the teachers and therapists. We work closely together to improve our students' reading, adaptability to inclusion, job training, life skills, physical, occupational, and speech therapy. In today's budget crisis we are the answer to the budget problems. We are an asset which adds little costs to the municipalities we work for.

Being a paraprofessional's union representative, I have seen a lot of different circumstances in which paras have suffered due to the current F.M.L.A. law's hour eligibility. Our district's administrative board makes paras, who carry their family health insurance, pay 75% costs of their insurance once they have exhausted their sick days. This is very costly and produces tremendous stress on a family. If you are suffering from a medical condition, the thought of not having enough money to afford astronomical health care costs is overwhelming.

For instance, a para at Mayberry Elementary School, Sharon Beaulieu's husband was diagnosed with brain cancer. Her husband underwent grueling chemo-therapy and was unable to work. She needed to stay home and care for him. She was forced to get help from a charity to pay for her husband's medical insurance, while she struggled to pay for the other half of the \$1,100 health insurance bill that was expected of her at the first of every month.

In another case, Leslie Sousa severely broke her ankle and was unable to return to work for over three months. Once she depleted her sick days, she was told she had to pay over \$2,000 to cover her health benefits. She felt defeated and applied for a loan from her bank. Our union was able to establish a "sick bank" for her. Fellow employees donated their own sick time. As long as her days were covered, the administration did not charge her. Although more than willing, why should we have to give up our earned time to colleagues because of the way the law is written? The current law, as it stands, allows the administrators to threaten or terminate our employment and /or health benefits, at their discretion.

In closing, it is heart wrenching to represent these hard working professionals and to see them knocked down at their lowest times. I would like to thank you for allowing me to testify before you today. If you have any questions, I will answer them to the best of my ability.