

Testimony of Jane H. Blakeman, Watertown Paraprofessional

Labor and Public Employees Committee  
March 1, 2012

S.B. 150 AN ACT CONCERNING FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE BENEFITS FOR  
CERTAIN MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEES

Good afternoon Senator Prague, Representative Zalaski, and members of the Labor Committee. My name is Jane H. Blakeman, from Morris here to represent myself and the Watertown Federation of Paraprofessionals. I'd like to address S.B.150 - An Act Concerning Family and Medical Leave Benefits for Certain Municipal Employees - Paraprofessionals are an integral part of the educational process. We are the "Well Rounded Educators" working in both special education and the mainstream within the scope of the entire curriculum. On a personal note I spend my day going from a metal shop, to freshman English, onto Global Issues and in an AP Government class. That's only the morning! Paras are not being covered by FMLA is a multilayer problem for both the para, the students and their families who depend on them. I don't think anyone would argue that academic consistency is key to a student's success. So when you have a para that may be One-on-One but needs to take sporadic days off to take care of herself or family member that would impede directly on that student's learning. The para must do this to maintain her/his job, it is a stressful time for both her/he and the student to whom she/he is assigned, as well as the teacher with whom she/he works. It is a no win situation for all involved. If she/he was covered under FMLA she/he could take the needed time for her/his situation. This would allow a plan to take place in her/his absence making a smoother transition for the student and class until her/his return.

In another case, a para is having a baby and works right up to the due date. She needs to do this so she can save whatever time she has for after the birth. The baby's delivery ended up being a cesarean section which will mean at least a six week recovery. On top of this the baby has some serious medical issues. So now what is the para to do, she is not covered under FMLA. She can't afford to lose her job because she needs her insurance, especially now. Granted she is eligible for COBRA but would not be able to afford it with no pay. At the very least FMLA would give her a secure feeling knowing she had a job to go back to.

Our state is in need of foster and adoptive homes. Paraprofessionals and their families are the sort of family that tend to fill that need. Paras tend to be of the nurturing type. My family and I became licensed a few years ago and took in three siblings. I thought I'd only need a few weeks off to make the transition, I ended up taking ten. Luckily my job was held because I thought I was covered under FMLA. Many paras who also wanted to become foster parents backed out when they knew their job would be on the line. If they were covered under FMLA just think how many more children may have a home today?

There is also the matter of the discriminatory attitude that my family or my health is not as important as the teacher I work beside every day. She is salaried and I am not. How is the Breast Cancer I fought almost six years ago any less a cancer fight than the bank teller going through the same thing. My father's Alzheimer battle was no less stressful on my family than say the office worker in the building next door whose mother is ill. Paraprofessionals should be entitled to the same FMLA benefits as their co-workers. Reducing the hours from 1250 to 950 would certainly help to alleviate that. Thank you for your time.