

February 27, 2014

To the Co-Chairs and members of the Commerce Committee:

Testimony regarding HB 5269 Paid Sick Days

Submitted by Briana Fernandez

To the co-chairs and members of the Commerce Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak about why Paid Sick Days are so important for workers like me here in Connecticut, and why I testifying on HB 5269.

Just last summer, I applied and was hired as an employee at a local McDonald's in my hometown of Manchester. One of my primary personal goals in working there was to earn enough money to not only take care of my basic living needs, but to also save to go to college just as so many other young people do in our state. And just like other young people, and all people for that matter, I occasionally come down with an unforeseeable cold, flu or other medical emergency. When the Connecticut General Assembly passed the Paid Sick Days Act in 2011, workers like myself all across the state who up until that point had far too often been faced with a choice between their health and their wages when coming down with an illness, collectively exhaled a sigh of relief. Folks like me who many times found themselves working while sick in an attempt to reach their personal and professional goals, now had protection against employers who in the time before passage of the law could fire workers with little to no recourse.

Unfortunately though, for me and other workers employed at workplaces not covered by the law's current threshold of fifty employers or more, this important step in protecting workers' rights — not to mention public health — simply does not apply. When I actually came down with an illness that left me too sick to move, never mind work I was unceremoniously fired from my job with no legal protections or opportunity for dispute.

It's no secret: saving for college working a minimum wage service job is no easy feat, but for me and so many others, that is one of the few options that we have. It's saddening to think that people who are working hard to get ahead and make a better life for themselves are not included in a law that aims to protect them because a pro-business threshold of fifty employees or more prohibits their inclusion. Sadder still is knowing that the very same business groups who worked to create the fifty or more threshold are now supporting HB 5269 which could potentially even more workers than the law does today.

The sad truth is, groups like the CBIA, NFIB and Connecticut Restaurant Association come before committees and lobby in the hallways of the State Capitol saying on one hand that young people working low wage jobs should do all that they can to improve their education to earn a better wage. On the other hand of course, they've kept themselves busy by launching campaigns against almost every effort that would protect workers like me while we're working to return school to improve our skills. This kind of greed fueled, two-handed rhetoric where the rich blame the poor for being poor and spend untold amounts of money lobbying for large corporate employers instead of using that money to protect workers rights and wages is not only sad, it's sickening.

That's why I am here to oppose HB 5269 and any other bill that would in anyway negatively modify our current Paid Sick Days law. Connecticut's Paid Sick Days should be expanded — as it has been in New York City, Seattle and several other municipalities since its passage in our state in 2011 — to include more employees, by way of a lower threshold — not less. Support for a bill like HB 5269 will only serve to put our states most economically challenged workers at severe financial risk.

No worker in this state should live with the fear that one missed day of work due to personal illness or that of a loved one, or even the need to attend a doctor's appointment, may put him or her in financial jeopardy. No worker in this state should fear that their dreams of owning a home, providing for their family or in my case, going to college – can be derailed just by catching the common cold or flu as all people do. I can't say this for sure, but I would find it extremely hard to believe that employees at the CBIA, NFIB or Restaurant Association live with this fear.

In closing, I strongly urge the esteemed co-chairs and members of this committee to vote in OPPOSITION of HB 5269 in its current form, and only support legislation that will cover MORE workers. I ask that you think of my story and thousands of other untold stories of workers in our state who are struggling to make better lives for themselves and their families and desperately need all of the protections that Paid Sick Days provides.

Thank you,

Briana Fernandez