

Testimony for Public Hearing
Senate Bill 221, An Act Concerning Paid Family and Medical Leave
March 8, 2016

Dear members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee,

Please accept my written testimony as an expression of deep and unwavering support for Senate Bill 221, An Act Concerning Paid Family and Medical Leave. I believe paid family and medical leave should be an essential component of employee benefits for all families in Connecticut and I wish to share my own personal story in support of this view.

I was raised in Connecticut, I have lived the vast majority of my 27 years in Connecticut, I have voted in every election in Connecticut since I was 18, and I am a University of Connecticut alumna. It is evident that I have strong roots in CT, so when I was pregnant with my first child, it made perfect sense for my husband and me to relocate back to CT to be close to our families after a brief stint working in Los Angeles, CA. I was lucky enough to find employment in public health research at a private university in CT. However, by the time I gave birth, I had not been working in my position long enough to qualify for FMLA leave. I was completely unprotected when I had to take unpaid maternity leave from my job, but I had the luxury that most do not have of an extremely understanding and accommodating supervisor. At the same time, my husband also took unpaid paternity leave from his job as a preschool teacher at a local daycare center. We could only make it 6 weeks without any income before I had to return to work. My husband and I made the mutual decision that I would work full-time and he would stay home with our son full-time, so we could avoid the high cost of daycare with the trade-off of living paycheck to paycheck on my sole income. As a new mother struggling to breastfeed, I pumped as often as possible at work, but I was still unable to get into a regular breastfeeding rhythm with my son. I contracted mastitis, an extremely painful breast infection, not once, but twice after returning to work so soon after the birth of my son and eventually had to give up breastfeeding, which has clear health benefits for both mother and baby. I wonder if I had been able to take a longer maternity leave and focus more on becoming a parent for the first time rather than the stress of rushing to return to work for financial reasons, then I might have successfully breastfed my son and not fallen ill. I would also like to emphasize that my situation was a best case scenario – and it was still a struggle. I had an understanding employer, family support, the ability to take a full 6 weeks off from work (a luxury in some cases), and a spouse that could stay home with our baby and despite all those advantages, this was still a stressful and financially straining situation. Please imagine those with less luxuries than I had and think of the stress experienced by those families, which certainly has detrimental health effects for entire families.

The birth of my second son brought my family and me face-to-face yet again with the family and medical leave system. This time around, my maternity leave was job-protected and paid by using my sick and vacation time, leaving no sick time in store for emergencies once I returned to work. However, the significant difference was my younger son was born with a series of unforeseen health issues that, for lack of a better word, blindsided us. My husband was only able to take 2 weeks of unpaid paternity leave from his teaching job and our son was hospitalized twice in the first 2 weeks of life, so most of his leave was spent in the hospital with our son. We had little to no time together as a family at home between the hospitalizations and slew of doctor's visits to various specialists, given our son's myriad of health issues. When our son had to have surgery at 9 weeks old, my husband was unable to take time off from work to be with us at the hospital before, during, and after the surgery. Once I returned to work

after a generous 3 month maternity leave (again, using up all my sick and vacation time), we had to send our 2 year old and 3 month old to a daycare provider who we discovered was uncomfortable handling our younger son's cumbersome brace that he had to wear full-time as part of his treatment. We had chosen this particular daycare provider proactively, before our son was born and not knowing he would have the health needs he did. He also needed regular stretching, physical therapy, and frequent doctor's visits, which did not take kindly to a two parent working household. My husband and I quickly saw that this was not an acceptable situation for our son, let alone for our entire family, so my husband applied to take FMLA leave from his job to care for our son. We cut our household income in half to provide the best care possible to our son and while we felt it was the right thing to do, it did not come without financial repercussions and strains. Despite these tensions, I consider our family to be lucky to have the luxury of making this kind of decision. The peace of mind I have every day knowing that my sons are under the full-time care of their devoted and loving father is absolutely priceless. Most families do not have this luxury, but a bill to introduce paid family and medical leave would enable families in CT to make decisions that are best for the health and well-being of their children and/or other family members. Employees across CT would be able to focus their attention on caring for their families without the financial pressures that drive too many families to compromise what matters most – spending time with and providing care to their loved ones at their most precious and vulnerable times.

Caring for a sick child is undoubtedly one of the most stressful and emotionally exhausting experiences one can endure. Unfortunately, this is not an infrequent occurrence. Often, parents must choose between keeping their job and caring for their child. This is an impossible choice that no parent should have to make. The current family and medical leave policies do not provide enough protection and stability for families, especially those who are the most vulnerable. As a public health researcher who is invested in building strong families and as a parent who knows firsthand the shortcomings of the current family and medical leave system, I cannot more vehemently support paid and job-protected family and medical leave for all employees in CT. If we want to promote a healthy and productive society, passing Senate Bill 221 is an obvious choice. Honor Connecticut's legacy of being a national leader on paid leave issues and vote in favor of this bill, which would come at no cost to employers. As members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee and legislators of the State of Connecticut charged with making this state a better place for all, I urge you to vote in support of Senate Bill 221 and fulfill your obligation to protect and promote the health of your constituents.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

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