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Testimony on SB 221: AAC Paid Family and Medical Leave

Labor & Public Employees Committee

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Submitted by: Stephen Karp, LMSW

On behalf of the National Association of Social Workers, CT Chapter we support bill 221. As an organization representing over 2900 social work members, as well as those they serve in the community, we support Paid Family Medical Leave. We strongly believe that all people should have access to paid time off for the birth, adoption, or illness of a child, illness of a family member, or for those suffering from an illness themselves. Social workers frequently work with persons who have found themselves in one of the above situations and in need of support. Unfortunately, all too often the ability to access leave is not feasible due to unaffordability or due to caring for a family member that is not covered under current law.

Family caregiving is much more common than one might think. While there exists numerous community based care giving organizations, the vast majority of care given to individuals is from a family member. Adult family caregivers, usually women, may experience five or more episodic or continuous care giving phases: caring for children, parents, grandparents, spouses and siblings. The caregiving role can be financially precarious, as well as emotionally stressful and physically straining. In our economy typically all of the adults in a family are working thus the balancing act of work and caring for a loved one becomes especially challenging. Paid family leave will provide the caregiver and family the ability to keep the family intact by providing income and time off to care for oneself or other family member. This bill is a pro-family policy that directly benefits individuals and families facing life changing circumstances and it may reduce costs to the state in social services delivery by providing the financial resources to care for oneself or family member.

One major concern is that currently, Connecticut's Family and Medical Leave Act does not provide paid time off for loved ones taking care of their family members. Many people do not have the access to additional resources allowing them to take the unpaid leave and, even for those who are able to, many of them are not eligible under the current law. Given that approximately half of all workers in Connecticut can't access FMLA because they either don't qualify or cannot afford to use the current program, it is clear that many families are put in the position of having to decide between paying their bills and taking care of their loved ones, a decision that no one

should have to make. Of course, without the means to support your family, it is almost impossible to provide the proper care to an ill family member. Additionally, for people struggling with a severe illness themselves, it can also be extremely harmful for them to endure the stress of not knowing how to financially support their families while still attending to their health needs.

Just as important as the reimbursement of the leave, is the expansion of the definition of a family member to include grandparents, grandchildren and siblings. This addition would allow the inclusion of many families who would otherwise not be able to access FMLA. As social workers we recognize and advocate for the needs of all families regardless of their make-up. We often see siblings and grandparents taking on the role of a caregiver within the family and thus should be allowed the same protections as parents and spouses. Additionally, more and more we are seeing multigenerational households where all family members play a significant role in the financial stability of the family, thus making it imperative all family members are eligible to receive FMLA should they become ill.

Connecticut has always been at the forefront of addressing the ever-changing needs of our state and now is not the time to let our families down. The unfortunate reality is that none of us are exempt from one day finding ourselves in a situation where we too need to take time off and need access to paid family medical leave. We support Paid Family Medical Leave and call upon you to do the same.