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SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

Thursday, May 25th, 2023

Testimony of Speaker Rachel Talbot Ross supporting
LD 1964, An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the
Commission to Develop a Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits
Program. Before the Joint Select Committee on Labor & Housing

Good afternoon. Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, distinguished members of the Committee on Labor and Housing, I am Representative Rachel Talbot Ross of Portland. I represent House District 118 which is the Portland peninsula and I have the distinct honor of serving as the Speaker of the House. I stand before you today to lend my strong support for **LD 1964, An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission to Develop a Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program.**

The last weeks you have with an aging parent.

The moment your adult child finally decides to seek treatment for substance abuse disorder.

When the “Big C” hits you. And you start the myriad of doctors appointments and specialists and chemo treatments.

The first few weeks and months with a newborn baby, when your whole heart has actually expanded with love, while the amount of sleep you get contracts, and yet at the same time your body recovers from a significant medical event.

An unheard of pandemic that spread across the globe, causing school, daycare and workplace closures.

A car accident.

A heart attack.

District 118: Portland neighborhoods of Parkside, Bayside, East Bayside, Oakdale and the University of Southern Maine Campus

There are moments in our life - in all of our lives - when we need and we deserve the time necessary to care for ourselves and for those closest to us. And all people deserve that time without the additional, crushing stress of the impact of what missing one paycheck could mean during that time.

An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission to Develop a Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program is the solution and a program that is long overdue. As you'll hear from many people today, the United States is the only industrialized, modernized country that does not already have a paid family medical leave program in place.

When we ask ourselves 'why' this is the case, the answer is rooted in the history of inequity in this country and the undervalued labor and work of women, and specifically women of color.

For decades, care work has been the invisible and undervalued underpinning of our economy. Care work - the paid or unpaid work of looking after the physical, emotional, and developmental needs of others - is highly gendered - 85% of Maine caregivers are women.

Unpaid family care work seems "free," so it gets left out of most policy conversations. But care work comes at a cost, including caregivers' and parents' ability to fully participate in the workplace, save for retirement, find time to give back to our communities, and do what they need to for their families. This unpaid care labor means women are more likely to work part-time or to leave the workforce, limiting their ability to access health insurance or save for retirement, and reducing Social Security benefits in later life.

Professional caregivers - regardless if they care for children, older adults, or differently abled people—are also underpaid and undervalued. Most of these workers are women and, nationally, they are more likely to be women of color. These roles are uniquely undervalued in part because they are traditionally 'women's roles.' Research shows that when women join industries that pay more, wages go down as employers value the work less.

Employers in Maine and across the country have broad discretion over their employees' income, work hours and work location, access to and type of health insurance and retirement accounts, and even whether they are permitted to stay home from work while ill, or to welcome a new child or care for a loved one. While some employers opt to provide generous pay and benefits – most often to

full-time employees in professional positions – many do little more than the existing unpaid family and medical leave law requires.

Nationally, in the private sector, nearly six in ten workers do not have paid medical leave through an employer's temporary disability insurance and eight in ten do not have paid family leave. And one in four new mothers goes back to work two weeks after giving birth.

Unsurprisingly, those who can access leave are those who can afford it. 80 percent of college graduates took at least six weeks off to care for a new baby, but only 54 percent of women without college degrees did so. Thus, those involved in the undervalued and underpaid sector of care work have little option but to return to work quickly and the cycle of disparate health and economic outcomes for individuals and families continues.

Paid family and medical leave is an essential policy to address the structural economic inequity faced by our care workers.

Paid leave helps people with health conditions maintain their incomes and jobs while enabling them to seek timely treatment and rest.

Paid leave supports elder care and keeps family caregivers in the labor force, including after a health shock.

State paid family leave programs increased parity in the duration of maternity leave taken between white women and women of color, as well as in rates of initiation of breastfeeding, reduced rates of food insecurity in the year following a birth, especially for households with very low food security, and improved rates of on-time vaccinations, with the strongest impact on families below the poverty line.

Paid leave programs improve the physical and mental health of new mothers, with the strongest effects for single mothers and mothers with low incomes, who are disproportionately women of color.

Paid leave benefits businesses by improving retention and productivity and boosting labor force participation.

Ultimately, paid family leave works. For women, for families, for business.

I want to thank Senator Daughtry, Representative Cloutier and the members of the Paid Family and Medical Leave Commission for their painstaking work to craft this policy. Their dedication has presented this legislature with the opportunity to enact a life-changing opportunity for Mainers.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today, I urge you to support this legislation.