

**Testimony In Support of LD 1964, An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission to Develop a Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program**

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Portland, ME  
May 25, 2023

Dear Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing:

I am stunned by the arguments being made in the press – and certainly later in this hearing – that Maine businesses and nonprofits cannot navigate employees needs for family and medical leave, that paid leave will increase worker shortages. This framing reduces us to “workers as robots” only useful when fulfilling a singular role, while we actually are all people, living in bodies, caring about our jobs and our loved ones. Paid Family and Medical Leave will actually allow more of us to remain in the workforce longterm, rather than “voluntarily” leaving under the duress of a medical emergency. PFML acknowledges and prepares us for the reality that we will all need time away from work, at some time, and those times are likely to be blips over a whole working life – the blips should not define our long term employment opportunities or financial security or our health, wellbeing or capacity to care for loved ones.

To be clear, health problems and caregiving pressures do cause worker absenteeism - sometimes there is just no getting around needing to miss work. Currently Maine experiences an absenteeism rate similar to the national average, about 2% of workers are out sick at any given time, costing individuals up to 20% of their annual wages when the need extends beyond existing paid leave coverage. A lack of paid leave doesn't prevent emergencies, it just leaves us scrambling to live without wages. With 1 in 4 Mainers unable to cover an unexpected expense of \$400 or more, this puts housing, food security and other basic needs in jeopardy. Why would we want our community to endure this level of chaos when an insurance program can help us through?

Unfortunately the answer seems to be rooted in outdated ideas about women's moral duty and inherent capacity to provide unpaid care as labors of love. Culturally, we continue to depend on women as “human givers” (as explained by philosopher Kate Manne). Meanwhile, real-life women are in a mad scramble to actually juggle all the balls, including paying the rent, for food and other economic realities of family life.

Almost 60 years ago, the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination - including sex discrimination - in wage labor, and I was born into a time that presumed "women can do anything." I was eight years old when Congress passed the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, 20 years old when the ADA passed, and 23 when the FMLA was signed into law. I presumed paid leave was coming shortly thereafter. Instead, Newt Gingrich and the GOP launched the "Contract For America" and began a campaign to insist that women should maintain unpaid caregiving labor while also working in the wage labor force, or should marry breadwinning men (seriously - billions of Federal dollars have been spent on marriage promotion).

Instead of public policy recognizing the universal need for occasional extended time away from wage labor, we've allowed disparities in well-being to widen. Unconscionably, 1 in 4 women return to work within 10 days of giving birth. This results in dismal rankings on maternal health, mortality and infant death in comparison to other countries. The Global Gender Gap study ranks the United States 83rd in the world for health and survival overall. Paid leave is possibly the most significant intervention we can offer. The consequences of stalled legislation are extremely expensive for individual families. The most recent labor department report estimates that women who are now in their 40s will see lifetime earnings reduced by \$295,000 due to caregiving responsibilities. Women my age, in our 50s, often suffer financially as we leave work to care for our parents, decreasing our incomes by an average of 33% of when non-caregivers often reach their highest income years. 11% end up fully unemployed to care for someone at home around-the-clock. Caregiving also takes an expensive toll on our own health and mental health.

I am increasingly recognizing that I will eventually need more care myself. I've donated to countless gofundmes and offered food to friends recovering from heart attacks, hysterectomies, cancer treatments, Alzheimer diagnosis, and oh so many orthopedic injuries. Researchers estimate that 69% of individuals reaching age 65 will need help with the activities of daily living at some point in our lives. I will hope my daughters are up for helping with my care if I need them, but not at the expense of their own careers, financial security, or well-being. I presume you all want this too. Paid Family and Medical Leave is an essential program for our shared futures.

Thank you for listening, I'm happy to answer any questions.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Simmons