

**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**

*Dr. Ruth Kermish-Allen, on behalf of Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Women
Appleton, Maine*

May 25, 2023

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

As Executive Director of the Maine Mathematics and Science Alliance (MMSA) a Maine-based STEM education non-profit and a current commissioner on the Governor's Permanent Commission on the Status of Women, I submit this testimony in strong support of LD 1964. My name is Dr. Ruth Kermish-Allen and I live in Appleton with my husband and two teenage daughters.

I would like to start out with my own personal story of how and why paid family leave is so important to me as a woman, mother, non-profit leader, and employer. My first daughter was born with a life-threatening illness that we were given absolutely no indication of during my entire healthy pregnancy. Her illness came about due to complications during her birth. Immediately after birth, my daughter and I were transferred to 3 different hospitals to gain access to more and more specialized NICU services. We spent 2 weeks at Boston Children's Hospital where they repeatedly told me my daughter may not survive. That stay was followed by 2 weeks at Maine Med and then at-home nursing care for months.

My employer at the time had a 6-week unpaid maternity leave policy, therefore I utilized all of my available vacation time to stay with my daughter in the hospital for the entire month she was hospitalized. At the time, I was told by my HR dept that I was not able to access any sick leave because I was not sick, it was not me who was in the hospital receiving care. When planning for my maternity leave, I was told that I was not allowed to use any sick time, only vacation time and accumulated comp time. I was one of the lucky ones since I was a work-a-holic and accumulated a great deal of vacation and sick time. I was able to stay home with my sick daughter for her first 4 weeks after coming home from the hospital. While managing a severely ill newborn, countless doctors appointments, and hours each day on the phone with insurance companies I learned how to be a new mother like anyone else does..sleepless nights, figuring out feedings, and all of the other intricacies that come with becoming a mother for the first time. I will add that in the prior year I had used most of my vacation time to care for my mother who had died from ovarian cancer.

Now as I have the luxury of a decade's reflection on this tumultuous time in my life, I consider it my duty to ensure the women and men that work under my leadership will never experience the hardships I endured while navigating new parenthood.

As a Commissioner on the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women in Maine, I know that unfortunately, my story is not an anomaly. Right now, only 28 percent of Maine workers have access to comprehensive paid family and medical leave through their employers.¹ Only about half of all Maine workers are eligible for unpaid family and medical leave through state and federal laws. While these laws help ensure eligible employees don't lose their jobs or health insurance when they take leave, most workers can't afford unpaid time off.²

As the leader of a non-profit that employs 35 individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds, all with stellar talents, I know that to recruit the best talent possible I need to invest in my employees' well-being starting with paid family medical leave. Even as a non-profit, MMSA has been able to create a robust FML policy that honors the space and supports each of my employees' needs to care for their families while ensuring my organization is able to meet our mission on budget.

If I would have access to the same family medical leave policy that I offer my employees today, the experience of both the loss of my mother and the birth of my extremely ill daughter would have been staggeringly different. I wouldn't have felt the shame my employer at the time made me feel for asking why I couldn't use my sick time for maternity leave. I would have known that my efforts in the workplace were valued and not questioned simply because I had become a mother.

The support this transformational bill provides will empower the citizens of Maine to know that they do not have to choose between caring for their families or being good employees -in fact, we will normalize that our citizens can be both and in fact, must, be both to ensure that we can strengthen the economic, social, and cultural outcomes of our great state of Maine.

Supporting LD 1964 will send a clear message - to Maine's citizens and citizens across the nation looking for the quality of life Maine can provide - that our state invests in understanding and building solutions to address the challenges families face. Our bipartisan commission unanimously supports LD 1964. Thank you for your time and consideration of this testimony.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ruth Kermish-Allen, on behalf of Maine's Permanent Commission on the Status of Women

¹ <http://www.maine.gov/legis/comm/psw/psw011113.htm>

² *ibid.*