



Testimony of Rita Furlow,
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Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing

LD 1559

Resolve, To Create the Commission To Develop a Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program

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Senator Bellows, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, my name is Rita Furlow. I am the Senior Policy Analyst at the Maine Children's Alliance. I am here this morning to speak in favor of LD 1559, Resolve, To Create the Commission To Develop a Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program. The Maine Children's Alliance, a statewide non-partisan, non-profit research and advocacy organization whose mission is to promote sound public policy and best practices to improve the lives of children, youth, and families in Maine.

Maine children grow up to become our future parents, workers, and leaders. With the right resources, opportunity, and support early on, we can ensure children have the strong start that will enable them to thrive. When young children receive the critical nurturing and support they need from their parents, they grow up to live healthier lives and become stronger participants in Maine's workforce. Our shared future success is tied to our investment in these children and their families now.

We know from research conducted at the Harvard Center for the Developing Child that for children to succeed in life, they need strong, responsive relationships with their caregivers, especially their parents.¹ These parent and caregiver connections are the most important piece in building a strong early foundation for children that is critical to all future social, emotional, and cognitive learning. The first years of a child's life represent the most significant growth and connection for the developing brain. Early experiences – both negative and positive – shape a child's brain architecture. Just like building a house, it is critical that the foundation for this brain development be strong, through positive and nurturing interactions with the important adults in a child's early life.

These relationships may seem simple, but they require care, consistency, and above all, time. In order to build and sustain this vital relationship between parent and young child, we need to better support families as they balance family economics with the importance of their role as parent and caregiver. LD 1559 would enable parents to spend critical bonding time with a newborn or newly adopted or fostered child, without the financial hardship of taking time off from work without pay.

We know that the early months in a child's life are crucial to brain development and in building the responsive relationship necessary for young children to thrive. We also know that breast feeding has long-term health benefits for both infants and mothers. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the six months of a baby's life. But that can be incredibly

challenging for a working mother to juggle. We also know that newborns whose parents take leave are more likely to be breastfed, and to be taken to the pediatrician for regular check-ups and immunizations.³ By creating a paid family leave system, we can allow parents to take the time to focus on developing positive, secure attachments with their child, increase rates of breastfeeding, and contribute to an environment of healthy child development, which will benefit us all in the long-term.

With 67% of children under the age of five with one or both parents in the workforce in Maine, we know that the majority of Maine families simply do not have the financial ability to take unpaid time off from work to be at home following the birth of a child. But we do know from other states that have implemented paid leave, when workers are given access to time away from work to care for a loved one or themselves, there is an increase in employee morale and retention, a reduction in turnover, and an increase in productivity.³ Creating family-friendly policies like this one, can also help attract and retain young families to live and work in Maine.

By passing and implementing LD 1559, we can create an environment in our state that supports and attracts both workers and families, by not forcing them to choose to be one or the other. We can support both through paid family and medical leave benefits. By implementing policies that recognize the realities of balancing family, employment, and financial security, we can attract and retain a strong workforce, and make critical investments in the nurturing and care of Maine's young children, which will benefit us all in the long-term health and success of our state.

Thank you for your consideration.

1. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationship: Working Paper No.1. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu

2. National Partnership for Women and Girls. Children Benefit When Parents Have Access to Paid Leave. March 2015. Retrieved from www.nationalpartnership.org/research-library/work-family/paid-leave/children-benefit-when-parents.pdf

3. National Partnership for Women and Families. Paid Family and Medical Leave: Good for Business. March 2015. Retrieved from www.nationalpartnership.org/research-library/work-family/paid-leave/paid-leave-good-for-business.pdf