



May 6, 2021

Dear Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing,

I join you today on behalf of the Maine Women's Lobby. For over forty years, the Maine Women's Lobby has advocated for public policy which increases the health, wellness, safety, and economic security of Maine women and girls, with a focus on the most marginalized populations and communities.

We write today **in support of LD 1559, Resolve, To Create the Commission To Develop a Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program.** We thank Senator Daughtry for sponsoring this bill, and the many other bill sponsors – Senators Carney and Vitelli, Speaker Fecteau, Representatives Bryant, Cloutier, McDonald, Millett, and Roeder.

An article in the Portland Press Herald, May 19, 2020 was titled: [*“Maine women and young adults hit hardest by unemployment.”*](#)

One year later:

Portland Press Herald, March 16, 2021: [*“Crisis far from over for Maine women suffering prolonged unemployment.”*](#)

In the last 14 months, the pandemic has resulted in generation-defining job losses among women in Maine. The Maine Dept. of Labor has reported a gender disparity in job losses every month of the pandemic, and at the national level it has been even higher. There are many reasons for this, but one of the key issues is because women are far more likely to leave the job force due to essential caregiving responsibilities.¹ The closure of schools and childcare centers and shortages among the essential direct care workforce mean that families must make hard choices. Not only have these losses been concentrated among women, but they have been concentrated among Black, brown, and Indigenous women,² who are more likely to be their family's primary source of income.

Long before the pandemic, women have been disproportionately affected by the lack of caregiving infrastructure in Maine and in our nation:

- One in four women in the USA take fewer than 11 days of parental leave after giving birth despite a recommended 6–8-week recovery period.³

¹ MECEP analysis of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2014-2018 5-Year Estimates for Maine, retrieved by Sarah Austin (2020).

² Center for American Progress. (2021). [When Women Lose All the Jobs: Essential Actions for a Gender-Equitable Recovery.](#)

³ Abt Associates Inc, Klerman, J. A. K., Daley, K. D., & AP, P. (2014, April). [Family and Medical Leave in 2012: Technical Report.](#)



- Women who drop out of the workforce early to provide care lose an average of \$324,000 in lifetime earnings, social security, and pension benefits.⁴
- Low-wage earning women, especially Black, brown, and Indigenous women, are more often employed in service sector and hospitality industries – deemed ‘essential’ but underpaid, undervalued, and far less likely to have access to paid leave and family friendly work schedules.⁵

A paid family and medical leave program is so vital to the health of families and our workforce that every country in the world besides the USA, Swaziland, and Papua New Guinea has implemented at minimum a national policy for paid maternity leave; and the President has announced a commitment to pursue a national paid family leave program in the US. Still, it could be as long as ten years before such a program is implemented, and women and families in Maine cannot afford to wait.

Developing a system of PFML for Maine is good for not only gender equity and racial equity but is good for our state's economy and workforce. But to do it right – to develop a system that meets the needs of all families, that ensures adequate and progressive wage replacement, that includes job protection, and that meets the needs of small businesses, we need to bring state agencies, advocates, and experts to the table to identify the best system for Maine. LD 1559 is the opportunity to assess the financial needs of such a system, to identify the resources and needs of different state agencies in implementing one, and to hear from the public. **A collaborative approach, led by the Governor's Office of Innovation and the Future, will ensure that we develop the best plan for our state to move forward with.**

It has never been more obvious how deep the need is to develop our care infrastructure, and at the same time, there has never been a better opportunity. Resources to the state from the CARES Act, American Rescue Plan, and other federal programs are specifically intended to develop programs that can better support our workforce and our families. This is an opportunity to address them together because workers, and employers, are family members. For too long, we have treated workforce and family supports as separate, and it is largely women and women of color who have been forced to fill the gaps.

We hope you will vote ‘ought to pass’ on LD 965.

Sincerely,

Destie Hohman Sprague, Executive Director
Maine Women's Lobby / mainewomen.org

⁴ MetLife. (2011). Caregiving Costs to Working Caregivers. <https://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/mmi-caregiving-costs-working-caregivers.pdf>

⁵ Robin Bleiweis, “Quick Facts About the Gender Wage Gap,” Center for American Progress, March 24, 2020, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2020/03/24/482141/quick-facts-gender-wage-gap/>.