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Hello and thank you to the honorable members of the Labor and Housing Committee, my name is Ronny Flannery, I use they/them pronouns, I am a resident of Lewiston and a staff organizer with the Southern Maine Workers' Center. I am here to testify in favor of paid family and medical leave, a crucial protection that Maine workers have long needed and deserved, and to speak out against both the worker retaliation loophole for small businesses and the decision to allow this benefit to be administered by a for-profit private company.

This bill as it's written would exempt small business workers from job protections, enabling their bosses to retaliate against them for taking paid time off. Small businesses make up more than half of our State's workforce. They are food service and restaurant workers, our healthcare workers, hotel workers, and retail workers. If this loophole is not firmly closed, than the essential care workers who feed us, clothe us, and care for us when we're unwell won't be able to access the program. The number one barrier these workers face is the fear of retaliation, and it is in all of our shared interest to protect the most vulnerable workers in our economy. Without job protection, workers will not take leave, even when they need it, and by deciding to deny these workers job protections we will deepen our State's already unacceptable income, race, and gender disparities.

I also believe we should be using taxpayers' money to invest in and rebuild our own State institutions, our own department of labor, and not to deepen the pockets of private insurance companies. There is no evidence that privatizing the administration of a Paid Leave program saves money or increases program efficiency. Outsourcing the administration of this program can require just as much effort from the state as it would to set up the infrastructure ourselves. We would still need to develop the RFP, ensure competitive bidding, procure a contract, and then to manage, oversee, and enforce that contract in perpetuity, Over a dozen States have already modeled how to implement PFML without turning to privatization. Privatization is not consistent with the commission's report, and will lead to cut corners, the loss of public control, of transparency and public input, and will create unnecessary barriers and hurdles for working people seeking to access their benefits.

We've been part of the PFML coalition from its beginning, and have remained a part of it because we believe in choosing solidarity in difficult situations. As poor and working class Mainers, people of color, and gender oppressed people, we have to search for and find shared values across our different and very unequal experiences of oppression under this economy. I ask the decision makers and power holders in this space to reflect on our shared and universal human right to rest and to care, and to implement this benefit in solidarity with the workers who need it the most.