

Testimony by Marya R. Goettsche Spurling, MD, CLC on LD 1964

Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and esteemed members of the Labor and Housing Committee,

My name is Marya Goettsche Spurling, and I am a Family Physician who has practiced primary care and obstetrics in Somerset County for the past seven years. During that time I have taken care of countless families welcoming new babies, and in nearly all cases I have seen how our lack of paid parental leave has caused hardships for them. I have delivered babies whose fathers have struggled to obtain time off from work to even attend their child's birth. Can you imagine? But this happens regularly, even for families welcoming babies under the healthiest of circumstances. Imagine if that baby needed long-term care in the NICU. A couple weeks off is about the most that families can often afford. At that point their paid time off has been drained, and it is impossible to be prepared for unforeseen medical conditions that may arise.

The World Health Organization recommends exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, continuing as the primary nutrition for the first year of life, and ongoing for the first two years and beyond. Babies who receive this healthy start are at reduced risk of childhood infections, obesity and diabetes, asthma, sudden infant death syndrome, and childhood leukemia. Their mothers who breastfeed are at lower risk of postpartum depression, diabetes, and breast and ovarian cancers throughout their lives.

I have taken care of new mothers who intend to breastfeed their babies, as the WHO recommends, but struggle to meet these goals when they have to return to work outside the home for a paycheck, often just a few weeks after birth in order to make ends meet. There are many mothers who must do this without the support of a second parent, and many two-parent households who cannot make ends meet with only one paycheck. This is a very common reality for many of the families I serve. I am repeatedly appalled and ashamed that our country is the only wealthy nation that does not support families during this important and difficult part of life.

In my personal experience, I was able to take 12 weeks of unpaid leave for the birth of each of my two children under FMLA. I am privileged to have an income that is sufficient to support my family even when it is cut by nearly one quarter, and we were able to save throughout my pregnancies to cover our expenses during those times. I was also fortunate to even be eligible for FMLA—many are not. But here's a twist: last fall, two weeks into my new job, I was diagnosed with cancer and needed to have immediate surgery, which then turned into multiple surgeries. In all I had to take ten weeks off for treatment and recovery. I am the sole income for my family, and it was not easy to keep up with our expenses during that time. If it is not easy for a physician at such a time, imagine when that happens to a family at the median income level or below. And these things happen. I think of my patients constantly and I worry about them even more when I see them unable to take the recommended time to heal because they can't afford to not return to work too soon.

Thank you for considering this bill. It is well-crafted, long overdue, and yet in my view meets the bare minimum of what our families need.