



MOFGA 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*

May 25, 2023

Good afternoon Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing. My name is Heather Spalding and I am deputy director of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA). I am speaking in support of LD 1964 - *An Act to Implement the Recommendations of the Commission to Develop a Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program*. We appreciate that this legislation would set up a financial benefit for people needing to take Family and Medical Leave to ensure not only the protection of their jobs but the continued income stream that they would need while not working.

A broad-based community, MOFGA is creating a food system that is healthy and fair for all of us. Through education, training and advocacy, we are helping farmers thrive, making more local, organic food available and building sustainable communities. MOFGA certifies 535 organic farms and processing operations representing roughly \$90 million in sales and we are working hard to create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent.

We are grateful to Senator Daughtry and Representative Cloutier for their many years of research, outreach and leadership in drafting a paid family and medical leave program. LD 1964 would create a system for employers and employees to make small contributions into a state insurance fund each pay period, which would then pay employees while on family and medical leave. This legislation would address many challenges facing Maine people and the Maine workforce.

We know from experience that workplace flexibility and financial security are critical for retaining a talented and enthusiastic staff. We also know that Maine labor statistics point to a need for reform when it comes to paid time off for family and medical reasons. Only 28 percent of Maine workers have access to comprehensive paid family and medical leave through their employers, and only about half of Maine workers are eligible for unpaid family and medical leave. Much of Maine's population lives in rural areas where access to medical care is not conveniently located, making it difficult to take time off from work. Workers with low wages are least likely to have access to paid leave and this legislation would help them.

Other states, including several New England states, that have implemented a paid family and medical leave program have been very successful with negligible reports of abuse. States with paid leave policies found a 20 percent reduction in the number of women leaving their jobs in the first year after welcoming a child, and up to 50 percent reduction after five years.



As an employer of more 50 individuals, MOFGA strives to provide excellent employee compensation and generous benefits. It was only recently that MOFGA's staff grew to 50 employees but we have followed the intent of the federal Family and Medical Leave Act for at least 20 years. To be clear, we have embraced the concept of ensuring that employees have a job to return to if they need to take twelve weeks off for family or medical reasons. We do offer generous paid time off including sick time, vacation time, personal time, holidays, parental leave and more. In the case of Family and Medical Leave, that time off has been and is unpaid. If an employee needs to take unpaid Family and Medical Leave beyond a twelve-week period, MOFGA makes every effort to place the employee in the same position or one of like status and pay. MOFGA continues to provide medical insurance for the employee during the period of unpaid Family and Medical Leave, but the employee does not accrue vacation time or sick leave while on unpaid Family and Medical Leave.

The Family and Medical Leave benefit that we have offered at MOFGA has helped us retain excellent members of our staff several times in recent years when our paid time off benefits alone still did not meet the needs of the urgent situations in which our employees found themselves. The Family and Medical leave gave them the time and space necessary to heal and return refreshed to the workplace. We know that the carefully crafted language in LD 1964 would provide an even greater benefit to Maine employees by ensuring compensation while on Family and Medical Leave.

We appreciate the thought and care that the bill sponsors have put into addressing the needs for businesses, especially small businesses. Maine agriculture is feeling the impact of the labor shortage and we believe that this legislation will attract workers to Maine. Many of our certified organic farms are small businesses with fewer than 15 employees. This program would allow our small farm businesses to connect their employees to the benefits of the fund, without having to bear the additional cost on their business payrolls.

This bill will make Maine an even better place to live, work and raise a family and we urge your support for this legislation. I would be happy to answer questions if you have any.

The Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) started in 1971 and is the oldest and largest state organic organization in the country. We're a broad-based community that educates about and advocates for organic agriculture, illuminating its interdependence with a healthy environment, local food production, and thriving communities. We have 15,000 members, we certify more than 500 organic farms and processing facilities representing \$90 million in sales, and we are working hard to provide training and create opportunities for Maine's next generation of farmers. Each of these farmers is a Maine businessperson for whom economic health and environmental health are interdependent. While MOFGA envisions a future of healthy ecosystems, communities, people and economies sustained by the practices of organic agriculture, we attribute our success to collaboration and outreach to growers across the management spectrum.