

House Labor Relations Committee Public Hearings

Paid Family Leave - August 27 & 28

**Testimony of Jenna Mehnert, Executive Director, NASW-PA**

Good Afternoon. I want to thank you all for taking the time, at the end of the day, to listen to my testimony. My name is Jenna Mehnert, and I am the executive director of the Pennsylvania Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW-PA). I am here today to offer strong support for House Bills 1155 and 1386. These two pieces of legislation are well crafted and clearly informed about the realities that working Pennsylvanians face each day to stay economically viable and physically healthy. Representatives Gergley and Gibbons should be commended for their hard work in drafting such well-thought out legislation.

As Americans, we like to think that we are a powerhouse that provides tremendous opportunities and grand potential for our citizens. Yet, we are failing to provide fair protections for those who have the least among us. Our middle-class is shrinking, and it is becoming harder and harder for working families to make ends meet. There are plenty of statistics to support paid leave, including:

1. **Nearly half (48%) of full-time, private-sector workers have NO paid sick days** ( 57 million working Americans).
2. **Lower wage workers are hit hardest. Over three in four low-wage workers (79%) have no paid sick days.** Research from the Urban Institute also shows that for working parents with incomes below 200% of the federal poverty line, 41% have no paid leave of any kind.

I am sure some of you are expecting me to testify about the need to provide paid sick leave to all employees as a critical economic human right. After all, I do represent over 6,000 degreed professionals who are committed and educated advocates. Social workers are, in fact, greatly concerned with issues such as poverty and other forms of societal oppression that limit individual's access to opportunity. Clearly, I could speak to how paid sick leave and funding to provide paid FMLA are the *RIGHT* things to do in order to create a fair and compassionate society.

As a welfare to work employment site, I could tell you about the struggles real people face in rebuilding their lives after an unavoidable crisis. I could talk about how hard it is to piece things together when you are poor, and how one sick baby can mean that sick baby does not have dinner. I could talk about my own experience working for years as a waitress or a receptionist through college where I never had any paid leave. Where a sick day meant that I would get fired. There were many days when I served people their dinner and I am sure they woke-up with a cold. However, my limited time is not well used by stressing the need to build system protections that care for the most vulnerable among us, because as intelligent individuals, you clearly already know that paid sick leave and paid FMLA are benefits that every working Pennsylvanian deserves.

I am assuming the question you are struggling with is whether Pennsylvania's economy can in fact support a mandate for a minimum amount of paid sick leave and a fund to allow for paid FMLA. My answer to that question is that we cannot afford not to provide these critical benefits.

I am a compassionate social worker, but I also operate a small business. My agency's operating budget is less than \$500,000 annually, and I employ four full time and two part-time staff. The mission of my organization is both to represent that professional interest of the 40,000 plus degreed social workers living in Pennsylvania, but also to pay equal attention to advocating for sound social policy. Clearly, these two tasks are incredibly difficult to successfully complete with my limited staff. When one person is out, it has huge implications on my office's ability to operate. However, even with the huge impact that leave creates, I still provide two weeks of paid sick leave to all full-time employees, and a pro-rate amount of sick leave based on the number of hours worked by permanent part-time staff. This means that a part-time staff person who works 21 hours a week receives 3.5 hours of sick time and 3.5 hours of vacation time each month for a total of 42 hour of annual paid sick leave and 42 hours of annual paid vacation leave. This amount far exceeds

the minimum amount of leave required in House Bill 1155.

I operate an agency that is financially in the black each year, and with staff who are stretched each day to out-perform high expectations. I am very careful about how I invest our limited resources to ensure the best return possible for the business I run. With all of the competing demands for my limited resources, taking care of my staff is my highest priority. Any business is built by the hands of its employees. I recognize my ability to accomplish my agency's mission is largely dependent on the commitment and abilities of my staff. Simply stated, I have found that a work force that is afforded basic protections and offered respect is better able and more willing to perform the tasks required of them. So it is not because I am an advocate for the poor, which I am; or because my organization is deeply committed to basic economic human rights for all people, which it is; but, it is because I operate a successful small business, that I offer my strong support to House Bill 1155.

As a person who has struggled to build a professional career and be a breastfeeding mother of three children, I would be remiss if I did not also offer my strong support for the creation of a fund to allow paid FMLA. While there are many reasons why individuals utilize the un-paid Family Medical Leave Act, the most common is probably maternity leave. Looking at paid leave time for maternity leave, this country lacks far behind many others. Evidence of this failure to provide appropriate leave is provided in a recent on-line publication drafted by Heidi Shierholz and Emily Garr. This article makes two critical points:

1. "In a selection of 19 countries with comparable per capita income, the United States provides the fewest maternity leave benefits in both length of leave and paid time off. It is also the only country not to guarantee some amount of leave with income."
2. On May 2, New Jersey became the third state in the country to pass legislation that would provide at least some degree of paid family leave (following California and Washington). Policies that guarantee adequate leave are increasingly valuable not only for working families, but also for employers, who benefit from the retention of skilled personnel in the workplace and improved employee morale."

I assess the health and wellbeing of a community based on the health and well-being of the members of that community. It is my experience that a community full of healthy and supported individuals translates to a happy and productive workforce. There are lots of operating principles and ethical values which guide how I run my business, but none is more influential than the words of my (at the time 93 year old) German grandmother. "You either pay now or you pay later, either way honey, you are going to pay." We can be a proactive society that helps keep our middle-class strong by providing basic protections, or we can invest millions more in a welfare system that does little more than perpetuate the cycle of poverty. After all, paid sick leave is for people who are working, and paid FMLA is for people who are working. From my perspective, we need to stop thinking we are taking something from companies when we invest in people. Simply stated, people are this country's greatest natural resource.

Thank you!