

Senate Workforce and House Business and Labor Committees
Testimony in Support of SB 454 and HB 2005
February 16, 2015

Chair and members of the committee:

My name is Marilyn Folwell and I drive a school bus for First Student for the Molalla School District, Molalla, Oregon. This is my testimony in favor of paid sick leave, SB 454 and HB 2005.

The job of driving a school bus is not for the weak at heart and is mentally exhausting. I start my day at 4:30am to get ready for work. There are many rules and regulations to follow, and thus we are required to check our buses pre-trip, including checking the oil, the tires, the lights (both inside and out), the underside of the bus for foreign objects and leaks, and the brakes to make sure they are working. Bus drivers work in all kinds of weather: snow, sleet, hail, rain, fog, in the cold, and in the dark most of the school year. When we drive our routes, we have to find the children waiting in the dark, and once in the bus there is none to very little heat to keep them warm. There are two routes in the morning, picking up high school and middle school children first. Then we go back out to pick up kindergarten through 5th grade. Some drivers also have runs in the middle of the day for kindergarten and children in special needs or outreach programs. In all, we provide transportation to hundreds of children daily at various times of the day.

We have a problem when drivers get sick, and we do frequently get sick, as we are continually hauling sick kids to and from schools on our buses. They tend to pass their sickness to each other and to the drivers. We then also pass our sickness to the children that we haul and we have a vicious circle of sickness.

Bus drivers are driving so sick sometimes that I feel they are a danger to everyone. If I go to work sick with a temperature, that can create a situation none of us should be doing and that is driving impaired. It takes away the sharpness to avoid accidents or sometimes we miss students in our routes. A sick driver can easily make a mistake driving down the road, and hopefully not one that has disastrous consequences.

The first year I drove bus I got sick right after Thanksgiving and missed a day and a half, but never fully recovered because I went back to work still sick. I was coughing every day and had a setback two months later and missed work again but went back to work again barely missing work but still sick. I coughed until June of that year. This year I got sick the first of November and I have been much sicker than last year and it seems I can't get over it. I have been to the doctor three times, run a temperature of 102 twice, and taken many boxes of cough and cold medicine but continue to cough. I am not normally a sickly person. Before,

I started driving school buses, I had not been sick in thirteen years even with coworkers being sick around me.

There is no sick leave for our district's drivers when we are ill. Our paycheck is very low for the kind of responsibility that we have: to drive our children to and from school safely everyday—they are our most precious cargo. The work, although exhausting, is often not enough hours of work to cover basic expenses and bus routes/driving schedules are such that it is impossible to schedule work elsewhere with a second employer. So we work even when we get sick because we cannot afford not to get paid.

Even in the uncommon case when we do take time off of work to recover, often we are called at home to see if we are going to be able to return in time to do the next run on the same day. We are often so short-handed that the office staff and mechanics are driving routes, leaving their jobs not being covered. They should never have to do our jobs. They are our support staff for communication and repairs. Consequently, our drivers feel compelled to drive even though they are ill. We never get the chance to get well and we are right back to work.

Some of the conditions of the buses we drive, I am sure, affect the health of all concerned: children, bus drivers and the general population. At the Molalla School District's bus depot, we usually get the cast-offs from all the other districts when they get new buses because we are a small district in the country but our children deserve as good as anyone else's. The kids are the most important cargo but they're putting all of us in harm's way by having to board a bus with questionable function. Some of the buses spew diesel smoke so bad it makes you choke a half mile back. The two overworked mechanics we have for 50 buses don't have the time to fix everything that needs to be fixed. Our buses wobble and shake and often do not have sufficient heat in them until we are at the end of our run which I am sure contributes to us being sick as well as the children we haul.

All this has a great impact on our being able to drive the most precious cargo anyone can haul—our children. It is unfair to everyone for drivers who have such an important job not to have some paid leave. Having paid sick leave for everyone would do a lot of good for our precious children and for everyone serving our children.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Marilyn Folwell