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Testimony on Paid Family and Medical Leave

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My name is Julia Goodman. I am an Assistant Professor of Health Systems Management and Policy at the OHSU-PSU School of Public Health. My research concerns the health impacts of paid family and medical leave policies.

The health benefits of paid family leave programs for parents and their children have been well-documented. Parental leave policies have been associated with increased breastfeeding, decreased infant mortality, increased immunization rates and well-baby visits, and improved maternal mental health.¹⁻⁸ Recent studies have started to uncover a relationship between paid leave policies and improvements in birth outcomes like low birthweight, likely due to an increased ability for moms in strenuous jobs to take time off before delivery.⁹ In my own research, I've found that women in states without any paid leave policies were significantly more likely to work right up until the time their baby was due; in contrast with women in states with paid leave policies who stopped working, on average, about two weeks earlier.¹⁰

There is mounting evidence that these benefits extend well beyond infancy. A study just published this Fall found that California's Paid Family Leave (PFL) program, which was implemented in 2004, reduced the likelihood of overweight, ADHD, hearing problems, and frequent ear infections among elementary school-aged children, with these results primarily driven by benefits accrued to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹¹

While the benefits to leave taken in the early developmental stages carry forward into later life, the need for paid leave also extends well beyond these early years. In a series of studies on parents of children with special health care needs, parents who took leave from work to care for their ill children reported positive effects on their children's physical and emotional health, but also reported that staying home strained their finances (especially when the leave was unpaid).¹² And it's not just parents who need paid leave. Increasingly, employed workers are caring for aging or disabled family members. There are an estimated 65.7 million unpaid family caregivers in the U.S. and approximately 2/3 of older adults with disabilities received all their care and assistance from family.¹³ The majority of family caregivers are also employed, leading to intense struggles between work and caregiving responsibilities.¹⁴ For this reason, the AARP recommends expanding opportunities for paid leave to care for ill family members.¹⁵

Importantly, these benefits are primarily seen with paid leave policies. Studies of unpaid leave policies, like the Family and Medical Leave Act, have either found little positive impact on health, or benefits only among relatively advantaged individuals who can afford a period of unpaid leave.¹⁶ Offering some

income replacement during leave appears to enable less advantaged individuals to take leave, and also increases the participation of fathers. California's PFL program doubled maternity leave utilization from approximately three to six weeks on average, with leave-taking expanding more among non-college-educated, unmarried, and minority mothers.¹⁷ That law also increased the share of fathers on leave by 46%.¹⁸

The long-run benefits of paid leave policies are widespread. The U.S. has low female labor force participation rates, and this has been tied to a lack of family friendly workplace policies. Paid leave policies are associated with a greater likelihood that mothers have returned to work nine to 12 months after birth, most likely because some women who would have quit in the absence of paid leave decide to stay on.¹⁹

So clearly paid leave policies are good for employees, but what about the impact on employers? Several surveys of employers in states with paid leave policies (e.g., CA and RI) have shown that the vast majority of employers support paid leave policies and report that they are minimally effected by these laws.^{20,21} In most of these cases, leave is paid for through payroll taxes so employers aren't bearing the financial burden of paying for leave. But even in San Francisco, where a new city ordinance requires employers to provide compensation for employees on parental leave, employers report that providing paid leave is feasible. In in-depth interviews we conducted with covered firms in San Francisco, employers told us they supported these policies, reporting that paid leave was an important benefit for their employees and having a policy in place helped to level the playing field among employers.²² The concerns we heard from employers, as well as stakeholders involved with implementation, all derive from the piecemeal nature of existing policies (for example, separate laws concerning job protection and income replacement).

The research in this area strongly suggests that when workers have access to family leave, and especially to paid leave, they are actually able to take the time they need to bond with new children, care for themselves, and care for their families.

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