

Personal Statement on Paid Family Leave
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I am writing today in support of the effort to bring paid family leave to the state of Oregon (HB 3087/2017). As a progressive leader in end-of-life care, Oregon has done much to improve the lives of those facing their dying time. Yet, we have not been equally supportive of those who simultaneously must care for them across the span of their decline. As a result, family caregivers suffer undue economic hardship to meet the needs of their seriously ill and dying loved ones.

According to the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP (2015), 34 million of us in the U.S. provide unpaid care each year to an adult over the age of 50, most commonly a parent. A widely cited study by MetLife (2011) found the average family caregiver is a 49 year-old woman providing unpaid care 20 hours a week for an average of 4 years; **as a result, the study estimated family caregivers experience a lifetime loss in wages and Social Security benefits of \$324,000 dollars.** The financial cost to these caregivers is enormous. Providing some respite from this economic hardship is consistent with our state values and priorities.

I worked in hospice in Portland from 2001-2014. During that time, I witnessed the personal struggle and stress many family members endured, attempting to balance work responsibilities with caregiving obligations. The lucky ones had incredibly supportive employers and bosses who stretched themselves to the limit to reduce the strain on their employee family caregivers. Most, however, are not so fortunate. They are forced to forego their earnings to support an ill parent, spouse, or even a child. Do we want employees sacrificing their earnings to provide necessary family care? Would we want to have to make that choice ourselves? Offering paid family leave creates a more humane approach for employees faced with the challenges of caring for an ill or dying family member.

Of note, it is important to consider who is considered eligible for family leave. As currently written, state FMLA excludes siblings. This is an egregious error. I once provided care to a young mother, in her 30s, with two young children, dying of stomach cancer. The only family member able to care for her was her sister. Yet, when she approached her boss about taking leave, he told her she was ineligible, citing the absence of siblings in the state law. Thus, both the patient's immediate and extended families were compromised financially – first, when the patient became too ill to work, and second, when the only person able to care for her was denied the right to maintain her job. This should not be.

Whether we anticipate it or not, many if not most of us will be called on to provide family caregiving at some point. We shouldn't have to choose between paying our bills and standing by our loved ones. Please make it possible for this choice to be made more easily by enacting paid family leave for Oregon employees.