

Chair Lively and members of the House Early Childhood and Family Supports Committee,

My name is Hila Ritter; I love being a mom and I love my job. My spouse and I have a three year old and a nine month old. My husband is a full time teacher, so we both work away from home.

Deciding when to start a family was primarily a financial decision. I had a low wage job with health insurance, but I still didn't have any paid family leave. Knowing that taking unpaid time off would be a great financial stress on my family, I tried my hardest to save all my sick and vacation days to be used after I gave birth. It was exhausting and stressful coming to work sick and being asked by my colleagues to leave because "that's what sick time is for".

When my son was born, I took sixteen weeks off to care for and bond with him. Only five of those were paid, despite the sacrifices I had made throughout that year to save leave hours. With the majority of my time not paid, our family depleted our savings account, began using our credit cards to pay for groceries, and amounted debt. During that time I qualified for SNAP benefits. It's still astonishing and humbling to me that we both worked full time in decent wage jobs, live a modest lifestyle, and yet still relied on public assistance for basic necessities such as groceries. We were able to prioritize being with our infant, but it was at the cost of our economic well being.

We need a systemic overhaul of the programs in place to protect our most vulnerable population; infants. They cannot yet speak for themselves, and I feel compelled to advocate on their behalf. Babies need care and bonding time with their parents to develop into healthy happy kids, and ultimately into adults who will thrive.

Right now, the ability to adjust to parenthood, learn to breastfeed, and manage a newborn is a luxury only certain people can afford. Our outdated workforce policies reinforce the antiquated notion that women belong at home and not in the workforce. They also ultimately affirm professional life as being built for men, and discourage new fathers from taking the time they need to bond with their children.

With paid parental leave fathers are more likely to take an active role in child rearing, and mothers have increased well-being, lower rates of depression and stress. Children are more likely to receive well-baby checkups and vaccinations in the first years of life and children with special health care needs and parents are supported to have improved physical and emotional health because parents are able to appropriately use their earned sick time for doctor's appointments (including prenatal care). As a society, we are all better off when kids have a strong start in life.

I believe this is a very important equity issue because there are large disparities in access to paid leave across groups of people, with access being particularly low among low wage workers, people of color, and those newer to the work force. This policy increases racial equity, leveling the playing field for families of color. The research is very clear, paid parental leave has positive impacts across the spectrum. It's time to invest in our children. Please support HB 3087.