

Good Afternoon,

March 22, 2017

My name is Melissa Bessette and I have been an Oregon resident for over 12 years. I am writing to you today to tell you of recent experiences I have had concerning medical leave and payments from employers and why having HB3087 will be a benefit for all Oregonians. You see, there is a huge disparagement between employers, what they are willing to pay for, how they pay it, or if they are willing to pay at all to help an employee while they are seriously ill. It seems as if they view it as a luxury or an extra benefit they offer, not a necessity. From my recent experiences I can tell you, it doesn't fall into the luxury category.

Back in October, 2016 my husband had 2 seizures on Halloween weekend. My husband's physician immediately put him out of work for a month and referred us to a specialist. Since all of this was traumatic for my husband I was the one who handled all of the paperwork for him and I dealt with the people who handle this for his workplace. It was a simple process as once the paperwork was done, they handled everything, including sending out any extension requests they needed directly to the doctor so we could concentrate on my husband's well being. He was paid at 80% of his salary, tax free.

On November 28th it was revealed the my husband had 2 masses in the left frontal lobe of his brain, that if not removed, would certainly be life threatening.. It was decided that the surgery would be performed the following Monday. My husband and I were shocked at the speed everything moved.

The doctor had recommended that I take some time put of work to care for my husband. I was all for that. You see, back in October, during my husband's second seizure I had re-injured my back while trying to catch him from falling on the floor and hurting himself. I was taking ibuprofen for my back and putting off care because my husband's injury was life threatening.

On December 5th while my husband was having surgery, I was applying for FMLA from my workplace to care for my husband after his release from the hospital. I knew going into this that my leave would be unpaid except for the rest of the time I had left for vacation and sick leave. Thirty two hours of pay for a month off of work. It's not a lot.

The day after my husband's surgery it had gotten to the point where could I no longer handle the pain that I was having in my back and pain control wasn't working. I made an appointment to see my doctor. I made it clear that I couldn't be in any narcotics since I would be caring for my husband. He gave me two prescriptions and set up an appointment for an MRI. I had previously been through chiropractic for the injury and it didn't help.

Fast forward 3 weeks. The results from my MRI came back. I was being referred to a neurosurgeon. I had two herniated disks in my lower back. I was referred to the same neurosurgeon who had performed my husband's surgery. After looking at the MRI it was decided that I would need surgery and my recovery time would be 8 weeks post op. That would mean applying for FMLA for myself. On December 26th I resubmitted the paperwork for an employee serious medical condition.

Here's where it gets difficult. My employer uses a different organization for payments. The contact people there were rude and acted as if I was trying to defraud them. This was so different from my one and done experience with my husband's employer. I submitted both sets of paperwork to my physician requesting 8 weeks total. This put me at the 12 weeks allowed under FMLA and the Oregon Leave act.

My surgery was delayed by a month because the physician was waiting for a surgical suite with an all day slot as my surgery was a complicated one. Which means I had to ask my employer for an extension past the 12 weeks. This meant yet another entity to deal with and more paperwork for me to fill out.

The worst part was speaking to the entity that was paying me. Again I was made to feel like a criminal and I had to submit yet another set of paperwork. Here I am trying to get well, yet I am the one up and around, running to doctors to make sure I receive payment. I don't believe I ever told you how much I was being paid. Remember now, my husband was being paid 80% tax free. I received 60% of my pay, TAXED.

I am not an Oregonian by birth. I moved here from The Biggest little state in Union, Rhode Island. The only one of 4 states in the Union that provides Temporary Disability Insurance to its residents. I was shocked when I learned after moving here that some employers require their employees to buy their short term disability, particularly those who employ low wage earners, and that Oregon doesn't have short term disability sponsored by the state. To me, it's not optional, no one should have worry about finances while they are convalescent.

Rhode Island pioneered state sponsored Temporary Disability insurance back 1945 and now also provides Temporary Caregiver insurance as well. Their TDI program provides up to 30 week, The rate, calculated by the state, is untaxed. TCI is 4 weeks, taxed.

Since then, only California, New York, New Jersey, and Hawaii have followed suit with payment rates anywhere from 50% to 2/3rds and up to a year off, and only for the injured or seriously ill party.

Not getting paid for the weeks I was caring for my husband set us back a little bit with our bills. My kids were able to pitch in and help us, although we are still digging out of the hole. HB3087 for me, would have made sure I wouldn't have to play catch up.

But there are people in our state who don't receive any money while caring for themselves or a husband, parent, or child during a serious illness. While they are recovering or nursing someone who is recovering they shouldn't have to worry about money. They shouldn't worry if they will be evicted during their recovery because they can't afford to pay rent. They shouldn't have to worry if their only source of heat will be shut off. They shouldn't have to worry where their next meal is coming from or if they can afford the prescriptions they need.

HB3087 would ensure that people who need the time off for a serious illness won't have to go without pay. It will ensure that men and women who need to take time off to care for a loved one who is ill will not have to worry about how they will pay the bills. It will help our service men and women who need it.

HB 3087 will make Oregon the 6th state to have a state funded Disability payment program. This is a concept whose time has come. In these uncertain times the people of Oregon need to know their chosen representatives are really listening and their needs are being taken care of. By making this bill into law, you will prove to them that you are, indeed listening.

As a Rhode Islander, I paid a small amount from my paycheck so, it would be there if I needed it. As an Oregonian, I will gladly pay a little extra to have that same assurance I had 13 years ago.

Sincerely,

Melissa Ann Bessette

Cornelius, Oregon

