

March 15, 2021
House Committee on Early Childhood
Testimony in Support of HB 2474

Chair Power, Vice Chairs Reynolds and Zika, and Members of the Committee:

My name is Nichi Linder, I live in Springfield and I am the mother of two young boys--aged 3 and 5. When COVID hit, I pulled my boys out of preschool and first grade respectively the night before the Governor's order to shut down schools. I didn't know then what we were going to do, but I knew I couldn't risk their lives by keeping them in school. My employer is based in Portland and I've worked from home for several years. However, my children are always in care or at school. As I'm sure some of you on this committee know, it is nearly impossible to actually get work done if you're also the sole caregiver for a child. As a working mother, I've had to use the screen as a babysitter more often than I'd like to; but that is only a short term solution.

As a grocer, my husband is deemed an essential worker. His national grocery store chain employs more than 500 people and therefore he did not qualify for paid leave under the FFCRA. When we lost our childcare, it wasn't a question of IF one of us had to leave our jobs, the question was which one. I make more than him and my job doesn't put me in direct risk of contracting a deadly virus, so it made the most sense for him to take leave from his job to care for the children.

He did so under OFLA with the temporary rule that made him eligible because our children's school and preschool were closed due to COVID. Because Oregon's Paid Family and Medical Leave law is not yet in effect, this meant we were suddenly short an entire paycheck. We were able to swing this only, and oddly, because of the absolutely astronomical cost of childcare. Half of John's monthly net income went directly to pay for preschool; so when we took our youngest child out of school we were saving those dollars. Nevertheless, I am still working on paying down credit debt from those few months when John was on unpaid leave. It's also worth mentioning that our preschool provider did make the generous offer to families at that time to continue paying ½ the monthly cost to hold our slot. I know child care providers are getting by on very thin margins and I knew they couldn't truly afford to do this. Obviously we couldn't afford it either. It wasn't an option to pay for childcare we weren't using, and now it is unclear if we'll have available to us when we're ready to put our child back in care. Lane County - as is the same with all counties in Oregon, is a child care desert and quality care is difficult to get into and families face months or years long waiting lists.

In order to go back to work, we both had to reduce hours and cobble our schedules together. This cobbled schedule leaves us only one weekend day together as a family and also includes the excruciating ask of grandma and grandpa to literally risk their lives to watch my boys two days a week. We are making it by right now, but it is critical that we ensure OFLA job protected leave for workers for school or child care closures related to a public health emergency long term. It is imperative that this protection continues to be an option for families. In the early weeks and months of the virus, I could not risk my parents' lives to ask for help with my boys. A

few months in, when we had a better understanding of the virus transmission and ways to reduce it, we as a family decided to have grandma and grandpa help in lieu of John giving up his job of 23 years.

It is worth adding here that our family's health care is all through his employer-provided insurance. I live with disability due to multiple chronic illnesses that impact my life every day. I already spend a not-insignificant percentage of our monthly income on copays, prescriptions, medical supplies, and treatments that aren't even covered by insurance. We don't have the option to lose our health care. And we don't have the option to go without child care if we are to work. Families were, and continue to be placed in an impossible situation. Making this protection in OFLA permanent in statute would be a small but critical safety net for my family and every working family in Oregon. I urge your support on HB 2474

Sincerely,

Nichi Linder
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