



D.C. CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

ADVANCING GOSPEL VALUES IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Statement to the Committee of the Whole

Universal Paid Leave Act of 2015

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The D.C. Catholic Conference represents the public policy interests of the Archdiocese of Washington within the District of Columbia. We submit this testimony regarding the Universal Paid Leave Act of 2015 (hereafter “the Act”). We thank Chairman Phil Mendelson and the Committee of the Whole for the opportunity to share our perspective on the merits and liabilities of this important legislation.

Catholic Social Teaching has long stressed the central role of the family unit in human flourishing, and that protecting this unit is the responsibility of individuals and political institutions alike. As Pope Francis recently noted, “[w]e cannot call any society healthy when it does not leave real room for family life. We cannot think that a society has a future when it fails to pass laws capable of protecting families and ensuring their basic needs, especially those of families just starting out.”¹

Accordingly, the Conference supports an increase in paid family leave that results in the support, encouragement, and protection of the family unit. This increase should be measured and balanced, however, ensuring that it truly benefits families. Indeed increased paid leave is of little benefit to one who lost his or her job due to onerous regulations forcing his or her employer out of business.

I. The Importance of Paid Family Leave

Although the family should be a central concern in society, it has been subordinated to other interests in the United States. According to Pew Research Center, relying on data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United States trails dozens of OECD nations in paid and protected leave for new parents; of the 38 countries represented in the data, the United States was the only one without mandated paid maternity leave.²

¹ Pope Francis, *Prayer Vigil for the Festival of Families*, Philadelphia, PA, September 26, 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150926_usa-festa-famiglie.html.

² Gretchen Livingston, *Among 38 nations, U.S. is the outlier when it comes to paid parental leave* (December 12, 2013), Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/12/12/among-38-nations-u-s-is-the-outlier-when-it-comes-to-offering-paid-parental-leave/>.

Not surprisingly, evidence suggests that paid leave benefits provide many societal benefits. As one health journal notes, “[p]aid leave, including maternity and sick/personal leave, has been associated with a range of positive maternal and child health outcomes. Longer maternity leave is related to improved maternal mental health, vitality and role functioning, higher rate of child immunizations, more well-child visits, and longer duration of breastfeeding. Further, paid maternity leave may reduce infant and child mortality.”³

However, when family leave is available, the practical application of this leave appears to be unequally distributed among socioeconomic and demographic categories.

Data from the CDC [Center for Disease Control and Prevention] Survey of Family Growth shows that Hispanic women were less likely to report having taken maternity leave compared with non-Hispanic White and Black women. A 2000 survey of employees demonstrates that women and workers who were younger, unmarried, or low income (<\$20,000) were less likely to receive company-sponsored paid leave. Moreover, the fact that the FMLA guarantees job protection rather than paid leave benefits may place a tremendous financial burden on eligible low-income families who have fewer resources to offset lost wages during periods of leave.⁴

Consequently, the least wealthy often have access to the fewest benefits.

Therefore the Conference supports the Act in principle, because it supports families, and does so across socioeconomic and demographic categories.

II. Prudential Considerations

Yet this support should not be mistaken as an absolute endorsement of the Act. We recommend a comprehensive analysis of the Act’s purported benefits relative to its potential deleterious economic impact on businesses. Here we agree with the many other for-profit and non-profit businesses who expressed in their previous testimonies that a more deliberate consideration of the economic impact is necessary and appropriate.

As a large employer in the city, we have additional concerns about the program’s operations. We request clarification on the following questions:

³ Megan Shepherd-Banigan and Janice F. Bell, *Paid Leave Benefits Among a National Sample of Working Mothers with Infants in the United State*, *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, January 2014, Volume 18, Issue 1, pp 286-295, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3840152/> (citations omitted).

⁴ *Id* (citation omitted).

Whereas the D.C. Family and Medical Leave Act provides eligible employees up to sixteen weeks of unpaid leave while protecting their jobs and benefits during their absence on a biennial basis, the Act would provide up to sixteen weeks of paid leave for residents and employees on an annual basis. In a case where an employee took leave under the Act non-concurrently with leave under the D.C. FMLA (that is, in a year in which the employee is *not* eligible for FMLA benefits), would the Act provide similar job protection?

Additionally, many city residents work in neighboring jurisdictions that currently provide unpaid leave but may provide their own paid leave programs in the future. Also, like the Archdiocese of Washington, many affected employers have sites both inside and outside of the District of Columbia. Has the Committee taken into consideration how the proposed program would interact with similar programs in these other jurisdictions?

III. Conclusion

The Act presents an opportunity to strengthen families and narrow the gap between those who currently have and do not have access to paid family leave. The Conference strongly supports these noble objectives.

However, the final version of the Act--or any similar legislation--should be one that truly benefits families and considers the economic interests of business owners. This means that it should not result in substantial job loss and should not be punitive towards businesses. A final version of paid-leave legislation should also provide needed clarity about its relationship to other benefits that are already offered, or might be offered in the future, in the District of Columbia and neighboring jurisdictions. Thank you again for your time and consideration of this matter.