

TESTIMONY OF THE HONORABLE ROSA L. DELAURO
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UNIVERSAL PAID LEAVE AND GUARANTEED ACCESS TO CHILDCARE
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Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for holding this hearing and for all of your work on behalf of working families. I appreciate the opportunity to testify. And to Ranking Member Jackie Walorski, thank you as well for welcoming me here today.

The focus of today's hearing on access to *Universal Paid Leave and Guaranteed Access to Child Care* has been at the center of my fight for working families throughout my career and I am proud to be working closely with your committee on these ideals. The *Building an Economy for Families Act* reflects the heart of the *FAMILY Act*, legislation I have introduced for nearly a decade to create a comprehensive national program that helps meet the needs of new mothers and fathers and people with serious personal or family health issues.

Despite all the years that have passed since we started working on the *FAMILY Act*, the United States remains the only industrialized nation with no paid family leave. That is simply unacceptable. But today, I am pleased that paid leave is finally at the center of our public discourse. We are at an exciting moment, where there are willing partners in the Administration committed to making this happen.

Last Congress before COVID-19, the Committee on Ways and Means held three hearings on the importance of Paid Family and Medical Leave, in which I testified at one. And earlier this year, during the Ways and Means Committee hearing, “*In Their Own Words: Paid Leave, Child Care, & an Economy That Failed Women*” we heard from working women who provided living proof of why we must recognize basic family and medical obligations.

Despite being an issue for decades prior, Congress did not pass the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) until 1993. This landmark law granted certain categories of women and men up to twelve weeks of unpaid job-protected leave. But, as we always knew, that legislation was

a starting point, not a destination. And now, chairman of the full committee, Richie Neal and the Subcommittee Chairman Danny Davis have taken this issue to the forefront of the agenda on the Ways and Means Committee and we continue making real progress towards making paid family leave a reality.

The *Building an Economy for Families Act* demonstrates the Committee's commitment to enact permanent, comprehensive, and inclusive paid family and medical leave.

And although this is not the focus of today's hearing, I would be remiss if I did not mention how the *Building an Economy for Families Act* also makes permanent the improvement and expansion of the child tax credit, something I have been fighting for since 2003 and was included for one year in the American Rescue Plan. This historic expansion is a lifeline for the middle class and would cut child poverty in half.

The biggest economic challenge of our time is that people's pay is not keeping up with skyrocketing costs. Few can afford to lose several weeks' worth of wages, whether it is for a loved one who has fallen ill or the birth of a child. It pushes them over the edge. And now, for more than a year, we have faced a new challenge: a global pandemic that created the greatest public health and economic crisis in a generation. Women and communities of color have been disproportionately impacted by this crisis, often forced to make the impossible decision between caring for themselves or their families and earning a paycheck.

During the pandemic, over 2.3 million women left the workforce, and even more women and women of color are working part-time because they cannot find full-time jobs. And as reported recently by the Washington Post, a quarter of women say their family's financial situation is worse today than before March 2020. Women's labor force participation has been decimated by the coronavirus pandemic. As of January, it was at its lowest rate in 35 years. But let us be clear, these

women are not *opting* out of the workforce, they are being pushed out by inadequate policies.

Our economy will never thrive if women and people of color are not fully represented in the workforce and that cannot be done without a strong paid leave program. If we care about getting women back in the workforce, we cannot pass physical infrastructure alone – we must also pass the *American Families Plan*, including the *Building an Economy for Families Act*, to invest in and build our social infrastructure and the care economy.

Long before this crisis there was a desperate need for paid family and medical leave. This problem, worsened by the pandemic, must be addressed in a permanent way. Few have the support they need in the form of paid leave. In fact, fewer than 40 percent of working people have access to paid leave for a serious personal illness. Only 21 percent have access to paid leave to care for a family member. And while more and more states, as well as private businesses, are implementing paid

leave, it should not depend on your zip code. Paid leave is a necessity critical for economic security.

Like so many across the country, this is an issue that is very personal to me. In 1986, I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. I was working for then Senator Christopher Dodd. I went to him on a Thursday and told him I would be hospitalized on Sunday and also said to him I did not know whether or not I was ever coming back. What did the Senator say to me? He said, “Rosa, go and get well, no matter how long it takes. You are still my Chief of Staff, you do not have to worry about your paycheck.” I was a staff member, with three kids in school, and we were concerned about how we were going to be able to make it. And with the support of my family and my friends, and yes, my employer, by the grace of God and biomedical research, I recovered, and I have been cancer-free for over 30 years.

Three years ago, my mother, at age 103 was dying and I got to spend every day and every night by her side for six weeks. No one told

me as a Member of Congress that I would not receive a salary, no one told me that my job would not be waiting for me.

It was a blessing, a blessing that cannot be there just for staffers or for Members of Congress. The United States needs a national paid family leave policy and we need it now. Paid leave is no longer a fringe policy position or a great nice-to-have policy—it is a lifeline. Which is why in March, more than 250 businesses, brands, and executives from across the country sent a letter urging Congress to establish permanent paid family and medical leave. And in 2020, despite political affiliation, polling showed that 75 percent of voters would support a national paid family and medical leave policy that covers all workers.

We can build the architecture of the future, but without a permanent paid leave solution, workers are at risk of losing their livelihoods, and our economic recovery is at risk of stalling. Now is the time to provide paid leave for our families and workers who need and deserve it. Celebrating middle-class families is not enough. We need to

elevate them, and we can do that with the *Building an Economy for Families Act*.

Thank you very much for allowing me to be here this morning.