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**Testimony by
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New York, N.Y.**

**Before the Workforce Development Budget Committee
Hearing on Budget – Paid Family Leave
February 3, 2016**

I am submitting this testimony on behalf of my organization, A Better Balance, which is a legal advocacy organization whose mission is to fight for policies that will protect American workers from having to choose between caring for their families and maintaining their economic security. To that end, we have been working on paid family leave issues in states throughout the country for the last ten years, and have been part of the coalition fighting to pass paid family leave in New York State for the past eight years. We also have a petition to the Governor about paid family leave that has garnered over 13,000 signatures with more every day filled with heartbreaking stories of financial hardship as workers struggle to fill the gap in their income caused by needing to take time to bond with a new child or care for a dying parent.

We are delighted that the Governor has made paid family leave a part of his budget proposal and we are here to offer our full support to this critical and long overdue program for New York’s working families.

Paid family leave – an issue whose time has come.

It comes as a shock to most Americans that the United States is the only developed country that does not provide paid leave to workers when a new child is born. Among industrialized nations, the United States stands alone in its failure to guarantee workers paid leave. As of 2011, 178 countries have national laws that guarantee paid leave to new mothers. Only three countries in the world provide absolutely no legal right to paid maternity leave — Papua New Guinea, Swaziland, and the United States.ⁱ With no right to paid family leave, workers must rely on their employers to provide these benefits, but because paying for a worker to be on leave for an extended period is costly, most employers do not or cannot voluntarily provide those benefits: only 12% of American workers received paid family leave through their employers.ⁱⁱ Among the lowest wage earners in the country, only 4% of workers have access to paid family leave.ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, far too many workers are forced to choose between their jobs and their family’s health and wellbeing.

The lack of paid family leave reflects the fact that our workplace laws and policies have failed to keep up with the changing nature and demographics of working families. The labor force participation rate of women and mothers has increased significantly during



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the past 40 years, and the number of dual-income families and single working parents has skyrocketed. This means that there is no one at home to care for seriously ill family members and that women of child bearing years are in the labor force, having children and in need of time off when they do. Despite these changes in our workplaces, we have failed to pass laws and policies that allow workers to care for loved ones without risking their economic security. It is critical that we pass laws to guarantee paid family leave to bond with new children and care for seriously ill loved ones.

Americans are beginning to recognize the importance of this issue for our families. In his 2015 State of the Union address, our President recognized that the U.S. is “the only advanced country on Earth that doesn’t guarantee paid sick leave or paid maternity leave to our workers.” He pledged to make Federal money available to the states to study the issue with the hope that they would lead the way in providing paid family leave for their citizens. California, New Jersey and Rhode Island already have paid family leave programs that have been extremely successful and have caused no problems for employers.

And this year, there are dozens of other states exploring the possibility of setting up their own paid family leave programs. Those states do not have an infrastructure as we do here in New York in the form of a Temporary Disability Insurance (TDI) program and setting up a paid family leave program will be expensive for those states. In contrast, for New York as for California, New Jersey and Rhode Island, there is virtually no cost to using our existing TDI program to support a paid family leave component. It verges on embarrassing that other states without an existing infrastructure for paid family leave are nevertheless considering it, while New York has not been able to pass a paid family leave add-on to its existing TDI program.

The emergence of paid family leave as an important issue is a reflection that paid family leave is a win for everyone: workers, businesses, children, elders, and the economy. A paid family leave program would make it easier for new parents—both mothers and fathers—to care for their children without undue financial hardship. Research has shown that paid family leave helps parents to recover from childbirth, bond with newborn or newly adopted children, and better meet their children’s health needs.^{iv} Access to paid family leave also increases the likelihood and average duration of breastfeeding, which improves the health of newborn children and their mothers.^v Seriously ill children benefit when their parents can afford time off to care for them. Research shows that ill children have better vital signs, faster recoveries, and reduced hospital stays when cared for by parents.^{vi}

In addition, with paid family leave, workers would not have to sacrifice their economic security in order to care for seriously ill relatives. The benefits of family caregiving to elderly and sick individuals are clear: family caregivers can help these individuals recover more quickly and spend less time in hospitals.^{vii} As a result, policies that



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support family caregiving create savings that benefit all New York taxpayers. Unpaid family caregivers not only help to ease the burden on our crowded hospitals and long-term care facilities but also create enormous financial savings. For example, recipients of family caregiving are less likely to have nursing home care or home health care paid for by Medicare.^{viii} In 2007, unpaid family caregivers in the United States provided services valued at approximately \$375 billion a year.^{ix}

As noted above, California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island have adopted—and successfully implemented—paid family leave laws that are similar to the paid family leave proposals in New York. Research shows that an overwhelming majority of California employers believe paid family leave has had a positive or neutral effect on their business operations.^x Studies have also shown that paid family leave leads to business savings, by increasing employee retention, lowering turnover costs, improving productivity, and enhancing worker morale and loyalty.^{xi} In today's economy, paid family leave is a low-cost way to keep workers employed and to help workers meet family needs. For example, women who take paid leave after a child's birth are more likely to be employed 9-12 months after the child's birth than working women who take no leave. New mothers who take paid leave are also more likely to report wage increases in the year following the child's birth.^{xii} When forced to leave their jobs or take unpaid leave, many poorer workers must turn to public assistance programs for support. By keeping workers with caregiving needs attached to the workforce, paid family leave can decrease reliance on public assistance, in turn creating significant taxpayer savings.^{xiii}

The New York proposals.

A Better Balance is on the steering committee of the effort to pass paid family leave in New York and helped draft the paid family leave bills that have been introduced year after year in both the Assembly and Senate to provide paid family leave to all working New Yorkers. That bill was passed by the Assembly yet again just yesterday. Enactment of a law to require paid family leave is long overdue.

I am here today to support paid family leave and the bill included in the Governor's budget proposal. It is a good proposal that will finally give New York families a benefit they desperately need with no cost to business. That proposal includes the most important elements of a strong paid family leave law:

- Uses New York State's existing temporary disability insurance (TDI) system as a base for the administration of the program.
- Provides workers with wage replacement during time off from work to care for a child in the first 12 months after the child's birth or placement for adoption with the worker's family. Paid family leave benefits may also be used for time



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off to care for a seriously ill family member and for military families to care for an injured service member or prepare for deployment.

- Family members include child, spouse, domestic partner, parent, grandchild, grandparent, sibling and parent of a spouse or domestic partner.
- Provides up to 12 weeks of benefits.
- The paid family leave benefit level will be two-thirds of the worker's average weekly wage up to a maximum cap. That cap will be 35% of the statewide average weekly wage in the first year, and then gradually increased over 3 years to a cap of 50% of the statewide average weekly wage.
- The bill applies to all private sector employees.
- The benefit is subject to a one-week waiting period.
- The paid family leave benefit will only be financed by payroll deductions from employees. Employers will not be required to make any contribution to the paid family leave program.
- The bill provides job protection for all workers who take this benefit.

The only element of the bills we have previously drafted that is not included in the Governor's proposal is the modernization of our TDI program which is also overdue as benefits in that program covering a worker's own temporary disability are too low, not having been raised since 1989. Nonetheless, in our testimony here we want to give the reasons why key elements are essential and need to be part of New York's paid family leave program:

Coverage of all private sector workers without reference to size of business where they happen to work is essential. The Governor's proposal as well as the Assembly bill covers all private sector workers. Because there is no cost to business in the paid family leave program proposed here and cost is borne totally by workers, there is no reason to exclude small businesses or the workers they employ from the benefits of the bill:

- **Leaving out workers who happen to work for smaller businesses is unfair to workers.** For most workers, the need for paid family leave will only arise a few times in their working life. But workers change jobs. After years of working for a larger employer, a worker may be employed with a smaller employer when his father has a stroke or his wife has a baby. If the paid family leave program is funded by employee contributions, this is extremely unfair; someone who has paid into the program for years may not have access to it when paid family leave is needed, the opposite of an appropriate insurance program. But even if the



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program is funded through the budget, everyone needs paid family leave and should not be deprived because they happen to work for a smaller employer.

- **Leaving out smaller businesses in a paid family leave bill is unfair to small business.** Small businesses are among the most important beneficiaries of an employee or taxpayer funded state paid family leave program. Small businesses are often like a family, and we have spoken to numerous small employers over the years who wish they could provide pay for their workers when they need time off to care for a new child or seriously ill parent. They are happy to give them the time. But they can't afford to pay them for it. Unlike many larger businesses that can afford to provide paid family leave out of their pockets, many small businesses simply cannot do so. We recently spoke to the owner of a small lithograph shop in New York City who got on the phone after his employee called us to find out if there was any state program that would allow her some pay when she had her baby. He was as upset as she was that there was none. He said how wonderful it would be if there was a program that would enable her to have some pay while she was on parental leave and bemoaned the fact that he could not afford to do it. Why would we cut small business owners out of the ability to offer their workers this benefit at no cost to them? Such an exclusion would mean that small businesses competing for staff will be at a disadvantage in recruiting because they cannot offer paid family leave that larger businesses can provide through the state program. I run a small non-profit and we do pay for family leave for our workers. But it would be wonderful if we didn't have to – if paid family leave would be provided instead by the state. As someone who runs a non-profit with fewer than 25 employees, I would be very upset if my employees could not take advantage of a state-run paid family leave program and I had to continue paying the benefit myself. Other employers would be equally upset that their employees would be excluded from the benefit, thus giving larger employers an advantage in recruitment and retention of staff—the opposite of leveling the playing field.
- **There is no precedent for restricting access to social insurance benefits paid for through payroll taxes based on business size.** There is no other paid family leave program or TDI program that has an employer size carve out. Social security, California TDI and paid family leave, New Jersey TDI and paid family leave, Rhode Island TDI and paid family leave all apply to all employers and employees regardless of business size. All proposed paid family leave programs including the Federal FAMILY proposal cover all workers and employers. Our New York TDI program has no such carve out based on business size. As a result, a paid family leave program with an employer size carve out would create confusion among employers and workers who could obtain TDI when pregnant but be ineligible for paid family leave because of the size of their employer.



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Availability of up to 12 weeks of paid leave is critical especially for new parents. The Governor's proposal as well as the Assembly bill provide up to 12 weeks of leave contingent of course on the need. The experience of other states with paid family leave indicates that for most purposes, workers do not use the full amount of time allowed under their laws. The only category of leave takers who do tend to take as much leave as given are new mothers. There is good reason for that. Indeed, the rest of the world believes that new mothers require more time off than 12 weeks. A 2013 Pew Research Center report that analyzed the policies of 38 countries found that the median amount of fully-paid time off for new mothers is five to six months.^{xiv} Many countries offer even more time. Swedish parents receive 480 days of paid leave. German parents are entitled to as many as 14 paid months. French women get at least 16 weeks of fully paid leave and can request a few years of leave from their employer. There are sound health and welfare reasons why new parents need at least 12 weeks and really need more. In the first three months of life, babies need constant care -- they must eat every two hours if not more, their sleep patterns are not established, meaning parental sleep is also interrupted. There are very few child care facilities for children less than 12 weeks old and to the extent that infant care is available it is extremely expensive.^{xv} Breastfeeding whose benefits are immense for both the health of new babies and their mothers is extremely difficult to establish and sustain if a mother returns to work too soon. The World Health Organization recommends breastfeeding for a minimum of 6 months.^{xvi} Three months of leave for a new mother is an absolute minimum for the health of the mother and the health of her baby.

Job protection is a key factor in enabling a worker to use the benefit s/he has paid for. Job protection — the right to return to the same or equivalent job after a period of leave— is, in theory, separate from the issue of wage replacement. However, it is actually difficult to separate the two. Without job protection even if workers have access to wage replacement, they may not want to risk taking a leave because they will not want to risk losing their job. This concern is a factor that contributes to the decision to use or not use paid family leave in states that have the program. In a study of the California paid family leave program, Human Resources professionals cited the fear of losing one's job as the main concern expressed by their employees when determining whether or not to take time off for bonding or caring purposes.^{xvii} The HR professionals said that the only thing that alleviated those concerns was the explanation of job protections provided by the Federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) or the California Family Rights Act (CFRA). Similarly, research on Rhode Island's program which provides job protection suggests that the job protection elements of the program have been important to its success with 40% of workers stating they would not have taken the benefit without the job protection guaranteed under it.^{xviii}



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Job protection is critical to insuring that workers remain attached to the workplace, a particularly important issue for women. According to the 2012 FMLA survey done by the Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, most workers who take an FMLA eligible leave return to work for the same employer. However, 16.6% of those who were not eligible and covered either returned to a different employer (4.1%) or did not return to work (12.5%), compared to just 5% of FMLA covered workers.

Both the Assembly bill and the Governor's proposal include job protection for all workers who access the benefit for which they paid. This is an essential protection as indicated. Without it, workers are unlikely to take the benefit. Without it the only job protection workers have is the FMLA. However, the FMLA only applies to persons who work for employers with 50 or more employees, and only those who have worked for the same employer for one year and worked 1,250 hours in the past year. About 40 percent of workers are employed by institutions that do not meet the FMLA employer threshold, and, among the approximately 60 percent who do work for covered employers, another 20 percent are excluded from FMLA coverage by the hours or length of service requirement.^{xix} This leaves approximately 40-45% of private sector workers nationally without job protection if they need to take time off for medical or family caregiving reasons.^{xx} Low-wage workers are more likely to work for employers with less than 50 employees: Fifty-six percent of workers with a family income of up to twice the poverty line compared to 42 percent of higher wage workers. It is particularly unfair for low wage workers to pay for this insurance benefit and then be unable to take it because they fear job loss. It is even worse for low wage workers to take this desperately needed benefit only to be faced with the loss of their livelihood. Job protection is an essential element of this law.

Wage replacement is also a key factor in enabling a worker to use the benefit, especially for a low wage worker. Recent research suggests that the number one reason workers did not take leave was that they could not afford the loss of wages.^{xxi} Preliminary data from the California Paid Family Leave (PFL) program suggests that low levels of wage replacement are a factor resulting in lower up-take rates for low income workers.^{xxii} Both the Governor's proposal and the Assembly bill require 2/3 wage replacement up to a cap tied to the state average weekly wage. The reason that 2/3 wage replacement is especially important for low wage workers is that although higher wage workers may be able to get by on a fraction of their weekly income, a low wage worker who needs every dollar s/he earns to live on cannot. To put this in concrete terms, a low wage worker making \$15 per hour would have a benefit of only \$300 a week if 50% of wage replacement is used but will be entitled to \$400 a week with 2/3 wage replacement. That extra \$100 a week may make the difference in that worker's ability to take time off and still meet the family's basic needs. In addition, it is more likely that a higher wage worker will have other resources to get the family through the period they need to take time off than a



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lower wage worker who is less likely to have been able to save money or have other family support.

We run a clinic for workers who are having problems due to their caregiving responsibilities. We get so many calls from workers asking us about paid family leave here in New York, upset to learn there is no income support for them when they have a child. Many workers call who live in New Jersey and work in New York and are shocked to learn that the paid family leave program they have heard about in the state where they live doesn't cover them in New York where they work.

New Yorkers should not have to wait any longer. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on paid family leave and thank you for your recognition that this benefit is desperately needed by the families of New York state.

ⁱ *Failing its Families: Lack of Paid Leave and Work-Family Supports in the US*, Human Rights Watch (Feb. 2011), p. 1. There is insufficient information on paid leave in Bhutan, Liberia, Tuvalu, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Suriname.

ⁱⁱ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the United States, March 2013* (September 2013), Civilian Workers Table 32, available at: www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/benefits/2013/ebbl0052.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* (figure for the bottom 10% of wage earners)

^{iv} *Ibid.*, pp. 37-48.

^v *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

^{vi} See S. J. Heymann, A. Earle & B. Egleston, *Parental Availability for the Care of Sick Children*, *Pediatrics*, Vol. 98 No. 2 (Aug. 1996), pp. 226-30; S.J. Heymann, *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families are in Jeopardy and What Can Be Done About It*, Basic Books (2000), p. 57.

^{vii} See, e.g., A. Houser & M.J. Gibson, *Valuing the Invaluable: The Economic Value of Family Caregiving, 2008 Update*,

AARP Public Policy Institute (Nov. 2008), pp. 1-2, 6; --, *Valuing the Invaluable: A New Look at the Economic Value of Family Caregiving*, AARP (June 2007), p. 6.

^{viii} Houser and Gibson, *Valuing the Invaluable: A New Look at the Economic Value of Family Caregiving*, p. 6.

^{ix} --, *Valuing the Invaluable: The Economic Value of Family Caregiving, 2008 Update*, pp. 1-2.

^x E. Appelbaum & R. Milkman, *Leaves that Pay: Employer and Worker Experiences with Paid Family Leave in California*, CEPR (Jan. 2011), p. 4.

^{xi} See, e.g., *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 8; E. Rudd, *Family Leave: A Policy Concept Made in America*, Sloan Work and Family Research Network (2004).

^{xii} L. Houser & T. Vartanian, *Pay Matters: The Positive Economic Impacts of Paid Family Leave for Families, Businesses and the Public*, commissioned by the National Partnership for Women & Families and conducted by the Center for Women and Work at Rutgers University (Jan. 2012), pp. 6-7.

^{xiii} See, e.g., A. Dube & E. Kaplan, *Paid Family Leave in California: An Analysis of Costs and Benefits*, Labor Project for Working Families (July 2002), pp. 44-49 (estimating annual savings of \$23.5 million in usage of food stamps and TANF).

^{xiv} <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/12/12/among-38-nations-u-s-is-the-holdout-when-it-comes-to-offering-paid-parental-leave/>

^{xv} In New York City the cost of day care for an infant under 6 months is \$330.00 per week.
http://www.dccnyinc.org/view/page/market_rates_for_child_care_

^{xvi} <http://www.who.int/topics/breastfeeding/en/>



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^{xvii} http://www.edd.ca.gov/Disability/pdf/Paid_Family_Leave_Market_Research_Report_2015.pdf, p. 11

^{xviii} Launching the Rhode Island temporary Caregiver Insurance Program (TCI): Employee Experiences One year Later:

<http://www.dlt.ri.gov/TDI/URISudyonTCI.htm>

^{xix} Jane Waldfogel, Family and Medical Leave: Evidence from the 2000 Surveys, Monthly Labor Review, Sept. 2001, at 19-20

<http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2001/09/art2full.pdf>.

^{xx} Waldfogel, *ibid*; Appelbaum & Jorgensen, Expanding Federal Family and Medical Leave Coverage: Who Benefits from Changes in Eligibility Requirements? Center for Economic and Policy Research (2014): <http://cepr.net/documents/fmla-eligibility-2014-01.pdf>

^{xxi} Sandra L. Hofferth & Sally C. Curtin, *Parental leave statutes and maternal return to work after childbirth in the United States*, 33 *Work & Occupations* 73, 78 (2006); Launching the Rhode Island temporary Caregiver Insurance Program (TCI): Employee Experiences One year Later:

<http://www.dlt.ri.gov/TDI/URISudyonTCI.htm>

^{xxii} Katherine Ross Phillips, Working for All Families? Family Leave Policies in the United States, in *The Economics of Work and Family* 165 (Jean Kimmel & Emily P. Hoffman eds., 2002). See also Jane Waldfogel, "The Impact of the Family and Medical Leave Act," 18 *J. Pol'y Analysis & Mgmt.* 281, 300 n.29 (1999)



**Testimony
by Nancy Rankin
Vice President for Policy Research and Advocacy
Community Service Society of New York**

Before the New York State Workforce Development Budget Hearing

February 3, 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of a strong and affordable paid family leave program for all New Yorkers.

My name is Nancy Rankin. I am Vice President for Policy Research at the Community Service Society of New York, a nonprofit organization that works to advance upward mobility for low-income New Yorkers. Today, CSS continues its 172-year legacy of using rigorous research to drive changes in public policy to reduce poverty and economic inequality. I am also a member of the Steering Committee of the New York Paid Family Leave Insurance Campaign and Chair the Board of the New York Paid Leave Coalition.

We thank the Assembly and those in the Senate who have championed paid family leave and conducted thoughtful hearings. And we are very pleased that Governor Cuomo has made paid family leave a priority in his executive budget.

When my 93-year old mother had hip replacement surgery a few years ago, I took off what I thought would be a week or so to get her through the operation and into rehab. Shortly after I returned to work, a wheel chair fell on her in the rehab facility, breaking three of her ribs, which set off a frightening downward spiral. I didn't know whether she would survive. In pain and immobile, she needed me to arrange transfers between medical facilities, to communicate among the doctors, advocate for her needs, keep her bills at home paid and provide moral support. My boss said, "Nancy take the time you need." I was fortunate. And today my mom has recovered and is 96. All workers need the opportunity I had.

Any of us at some point may need paid family leave. Whether it is to care for a newborn, an aging parent who suddenly suffers a stroke, a spouse diagnosed with cancer or a child injured in a devastating accident – these life events affect all of us. For that reason, paid family leave should cover all employees, regardless of business size. That's the role of government, to protect all of us, not just some of us, and to create a level playing field for all employers, not just some. Spreading the costs by using social insurance is precisely what makes the program affordable to all employers and all workers.

We would not want small businesses to be unable to compete for good workers because they could not offer paid family leave. Moreover, failing to cover smaller firms would leave out a vast number of New Yorkers. For example, 2 million workers, or 31 percent of private sector employees statewide, are employed by firms with fewer than 25 workers. (Source: CSS calculations using the March 2010 CPS to determine share of workers by employer size, and the March 2014 CPS for current employment. Analysis excludes self-employed who are not covered by TDI.)

Since workers will be getting insurance benefits while on leave, and not paid by their employers, businesses can use that money to increase the hours of another worker or even hire a temporary replacement without adding labor costs.

Paid family leave should be 12 weeks. Dr. Benard Dreyer, President of the American Academy of Pediatrics and head of Pediatrics at Bellevue Hospital Center in NYC, has said 12 weeks is a very modest, minimum amount of time, especially for new mothers. It increases initiation and duration of breastfeeding with its critical impact on bonding, stimulating brain development and strengthening the immune system. It will decrease maternal depression with its harmful effects on children. It is especially important for premature babies. And when fathers are able to take paid leave, it makes a big difference for their lifelong engagement with their children. In other states with paid family leave, more than 80 percent of claims are for parental leave. Most workers using leave to care for a seriously ill family member will not take 12 weeks, but it is essential for those who do need it. Some opponents have voiced fears that workers will try to game the system. But it's very hard to survive on less than a full paycheck. So that will be a strong check against overuse. And in fact, studies show abuse has not been a problem in states with paid family leave.

In New York City, where my organization is based, one out of four working women lives in a low-income household. That's close to half a million working women, struggling to get by on less than \$38,000 for a family of three. Almost two-thirds of them are black or

Latina. Their jobs and earnings are essential for keeping their families afloat. These same workers are the customers of neighborhood businesses, so sustaining their employment through normal life events keeps Main Street growing.

Low-paid workers are unable to save anything from their inadequate wages to sustain themselves and their families for days, much less weeks, without a paycheck. According to CSS's 2015 annual Unheard Third survey, over half of low-income working mothers in New York City have less than \$500 in savings. Over a third of these moms don't even have \$100. With no cushion to fall back on, low-wage workers cannot survive on half their weekly wage. And it is unfair to ask them to contribute money from their meager paychecks each week for a benefit so low they will not be able to afford to actually use it. We must have a benefit that replaces two-thirds of weekly wages for low-income workers from the start.

Job security is also essential. Both the Governor's proposal and the Nolan and Addabbo bills agree on this point. What good is the promise of a few weeks of benefits if you have no job to return to? Workers taking leave to care for an older spouse or aging parent are likely to be in their late fifties or sixties. If they lose their jobs, what are their prospects of finding a new one? Research shows new mothers are more likely to return to work and remain attached to the labor force when they have paid family leave. This raises women's lifetime earnings and reduces use of public benefits.

Modernizing our existing Temporary Disability Insurance system is a smart, affordable, self-sustaining way to provide paid family leave. Ideally, we should also raise the benefit level for a worker's own medical disability under TDI. Frozen at \$170 since 1989, New York's disability benefits lag dramatically below every other TDI state.

We see a rising intensity of public support for paid family leave and a growing consensus on what's needed. CSS's 2015 survey found that eight out of 10 city residents are willing to have a dollar a week deducted from their paychecks in order to get paid family leave—including 83 percent of low-income private sector workers. A Siena College poll released just this week showed that eight out of ten New York voters—from every party and every region of the state—want to see 12 weeks of job-protected paid family leave become a reality.

Paid Family Leave is an idea whose time has come.

Thank you.

My name is Sally Heron and this is my daughter, Adira. I am a social worker at a women's health center in Buffalo, NY.

I really loved being pregnant with Adira. I prepared myself well for a normal pregnancy and a peaceful birth. I ate healthy, exercised, and anticipated becoming a mother with excitement and joy. My small workplace offered no paid maternity leave and, as a single, working mom, I planned and saved carefully for a six-week maternity leave.

Yet all of that preparation and planning went flying out the window when I went into preterm labor in July. After nine days of bed rest, Adira was born by Cesarean birth, just one day shy of 29 weeks. She weighed only 2lb 2oz.

For a mom recovering from a Cesarean, NYS Disability currently provides eight weeks of leave at a meager rate. I returned to work after only five weeks, with Adira still in the NICU. I ran between home, work, and hospital each day, still recovering physically and emotionally. No one would argue that this was a good option, but I knew she would need me more after she came home, and that during that time I would be bringing in no income at all. Working with her in the hospital seemed like the least bad of my limited options.

Although this experience was so difficult, I recognize how lucky we were. Aside from a few minor, routine preemie issues, Adira was and is a mighty little person. I also healed well. I lived very close to the hospital. I had overwhelming support throughout. Although my savings were meager, I was not living paycheck-to-paycheck.

We desperately need Paid Family Leave now. Working with new families, I see how this system is inadequate in the best of circumstances. For NICU families, we are forced into making unbearable choices and the consequences for us are devastating. Parents need to be able to focus on advocating for their children, on establishing a breastfeeding relationship if they are willing and able, and, when baby comes home, they need a *significant* amount of time for establishing a strong, loving bond. For so many, for the families most at risk of a NICU stay, this is unattainable without paid leave at a level on which they can actually survive. Caring for your baby is not a privilege: it is a right.

Sally Heron

Buffalo, NY

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