



Testimony of

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Before the

**House Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce, Postal
Service, and the District of Columbia**

And

The Joint Economic Committee

On

**Investing in the Future of the Federal Workforce: Paid
Parental Leave Improves
Recruitment and Retention**

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Marchant, Vice Chair Maloney and Ranking Member Saxton, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on the subject of paid parental leave.

When the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act was passed, it was viewed as an important step in helping Americans balance family needs and work needs. But it was also just a first step. Finally, it would be possible to stay with your newborn child or newly adopted child, care for a sick child or seek medical attention for yourself without the added stress of losing your job. Since that time, however, it has become clear that many who would take advantage of time off for family and medical leave reasons have not done so because they were unable to forgo their income. We have to ask ourselves the question – Is it fair to have a benefit that many federal employees cannot take advantage of?

It is time for the federal government, as the largest employer in this country, to step up and make family leave real, not a mirage that few can afford to use. We applaud Congresswoman Maloney's efforts in H.R.3799 to provide paid parental leave. Being able to substitute any leave without pay under FMLA with eight weeks of paid leave in addition to any leave accrued or accumulated will make a significant difference in the lives of both parent and child. This is an opportunity to provide federal workers with a benefit that not only helps them, but helps society in general, by offering a chance for a mother or a father to bond with the child. It allows employees time to adjust to their role

as parents and to recover from childbirth and/or find child care for when they go back to work.

In the 1880's, Germany established, for the first time ever, paid maternity leave. In the early 1900's, the International Labor Organization (ILO) proposed that working women be entitled to 12 weeks of maternity leave at two-thirds of pay. As we all know, in the 1960s and 1970s, the face of the world was changed by the increased rate of women participating in the workforce. Most industrialized nations changed, too, to provide paid family leave, and in many cases much more than eight weeks. According to Columbia University's Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child, Youth and Family Policies, "Some 128 countries currently provide paid and job-protected leave each year. The average paid leave is for 16 weeks, which includes pre- and post-birth time off." (Issue Brief, Spring 2002.)

In a time where there are dire predictions about being able to attract and retain enough employees to do the work of government, when it has become clear that the federal government is going to have to step up in order to continue to draw "the best and brightest," paid family and medical leave can provide that kind of incentive. Let me share with you the situations of two of our members that exemplify the deficiencies of the present system. The first person had her fourth child two years ago and took advanced sick leave to recover from the birth. She needed to maintain her income. Shortly after she returned to work, she was diagnosed with cancer. She had surgery and then chemotherapy. She was out for six months. Two of her children have asthma and are

sick frequently. She now wears a heart monitor and must be checked by a doctor every couple of weeks. She still owes 60 hours of sick leave. Now, she must take leave without pay every time she or the kids need to go to the doctor, and she can't afford it. Our second member took advanced sick leave to recover from her pregnancy and birth of her child. She still owes 162 hours. Her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, and with two small children at home, she worked overtime to get the compensatory time to go stay with her mother. She has postponed gall stone surgery twice because she cannot afford to take leave without pay. She wants to be able to take time off to be involved in her children's activities, but she can't see a time when that would be feasible.

NTEU strongly supports the eight weeks of paid parental leave in Congresswoman Maloney's bill, H.R. 3799. Sadly, even with that substantial benefit, people will still find themselves in trouble when a serious health condition befalls them or a loved one. In these situations, sick leave quickly runs out. Sometimes, employees find themselves in the situation of paying back advanced leave when another illness strikes. Some form of an insurance program that replaces pay would offer support for employees to recover from an illness, to care for adult family members, helping to reduce or avoid the cost of nursing, or to aid in the recovery of a child. And, imagine what support such a program would be to those employees who are taking time away from their job to care for their relatives wounded in war. We applaud the recent legislation allowing 26 weeks to care for our injured soldiers, but 26 weeks is a long time to be without income.

One proposal that would help in situations like the ones I am discussing deserves further investigation. Paid parental leave in combination with a short-term disability insurance program would provide broader coverage for the kind of situations, both parental and medical, that we wanted to address when the Family and Medical Leave Act was passed. Quite some time ago, OPM promised an outline of such a short term disability insurance plan, but we have yet to see one developed. Programs, such as the one operating in California, have resulted in an insurance benefit that everyone can afford, not just the wealthy. We would be happy to join in any discussions of such a program, and we welcome your leadership, Mr. Chairman, in studying the possibility of short term disability insurance as one way to replace wages lost when taking family and medical leave.

In conclusion, it is time for the United States to catch up with the rest of the world by offering paid family and medical leave. Wouldn't it be nice if the federal government, once thought of as pioneering and inventive in its personnel programs, was at the forefront of *this* growing movement?

Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions.