

THE WESTCHESTER WOMEN'S AGENDA

A STRONG VOICE FOR
WOMEN IN WESTCHESTER

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STATEMENT ON THE PAID FAMILY LEAVE INSURANCE PROGRAM INCLUDED IN THE PROPOSED 2016-2017 NEW YORK STATE BUDGET FEBRUARY 3, 2016

Members of the Workforce Development Joint Budget Hearing, thank you for the opportunity to share our support for a strong paid family leave program in New York State. Our names are Noelle Damico and Antoinette Klatzky and as co-chairs we are testifying on behalf of the Westchester Women's Agenda, a member of the New York State Paid Family Leave Campaign. The WWA, a nonpartisan feminist coalition, plays a significant role in Westchester County by advocating for and influencing legislative policy affecting women and children. Our 25 organizational members serve a wide variety of underserved populations in Westchester County, and together with 35 individual community activists work to advance the mission.

A strong paid family leave program would ensure that when workers need to be with their families to bond with a new child or care for a seriously ill family member they will be able to meet these health and family responsibilities without putting their jobs and financial stability at risk. A strong paid family leave program will:

- Cover all workers
- Provide up to twelve weeks of leave
- Provide two-thirds wage replacement when a worker is on leave
- Provide job protection to workers who take leave
- Raise the benefit under the existing Temporary Disability Insurance program

Paid family leave must cover all workers. A program that does not apply to smaller businesses will exclude millions of workers. There is no financial penalty for any business under the Paid Family Leave program in the budget because it is an insurance program – workers are paid by the insurance provider when on leave, not by the employer. The employer can use the worker's

salary to pay for any costs associated with the leave, such as increasing hours or replacements. An insurance program where everyone participates is what makes the benefit affordable to all employers and employees. No social insurance program excludes businesses based on size.

Workers need up to twelve weeks of leave. According to physicians, twelve weeks of leave is the minimal time parents need to bond and care for newborns, with lasting impacts for healthy child development. This twelve week period is also critical for breastfeeding, which provides major health benefits to both mothers and babies. Experience in the states that have paid family leave programs – California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island – show that workers take only the time they need or can afford. Many will not take the full twelve weeks.

A sufficient wage replacement rate (the percentage of a worker's income the worker receives while on leave) is critical to ensure that workers receive enough income to afford to take leave. Low-wage workers generally have little or no savings. Receiving only half their wages while on leave is insufficient to allow them to take time off. Under a proposal of 50% wage replacement a minimum wage worker would get just \$180/week. Low-wage workers will not be able to take this leave, even though they have paid for it. A wage replacement rate of two-thirds will enable low-wage workers to take the leave when they need to.

Workers will be unwilling to risk their jobs to take paid family leave benefits without job protection. When workers aren't able to take leave and then return to their job they end up on public assistance, costing taxpayers money. Job-protected leave is especially important for keeping mothers attached to the workforce and reducing the income hit women take when they become mothers. Analysis of the Rhode Island paid leave program shows that 40% of workers would not have taken the paid family leave benefit without the job protection that the Rhode Island program guarantees.

The benefit for Temporary Disability Insurance has been at \$170 a week since 1989, too low to protect workers from financial difficulty when they use it. A meaningful increase ensures that workers can avoid financial hardship, provides parity for workers dealing with their own disability and those caring for a family member, and provides an adequate benefit for women who experience complications during pregnancy. This benefit needs to be raised to provide today's families access to financial stability when using Temporary Disability Insurance.

The time is now for New York to establish a strong paid family leave insurance program. We have the opportunity to do that through the FY 2016-17 budget. We urge you to enact a program that covers all workers, provides 12 weeks of leave, provides two-thirds wage replacement, provides job protection, and raises the Temporary Disability Insurance benefit.