

On behalf of the NY State Nurses Association, I want to thank the members of the Workforce Development Joint Committee for holding this budget hearing and giving us an opportunity to testify today. My name is Carol Ann Lemon and I am testifying on behalf of the New York State Nurses Association, a union representing more than 37,000 registered nurses in NY State and a member of the New York State Paid Family Leave Campaign.

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.

As a registered nurse, I have seen time and again, families struggling with the difficult decisions of leaving their loved ones alone in the hospital during their most vulnerable times. I have seen new mothers in tears over the thought of having to return to work after just a few weeks. I have also seen too many patients pass away alone, without family at the bedside, because time away from work would have meant choosing between paying the mortgage or putting food on the table and spending those last days with mom or dad.

Adequate wage replacement is important to protect low wage workers who live paycheck to paycheck and do not have savings to fall back on.

NYSNA supports a strong paid family leave program that will:

- Cover all workers
- Provide up to twelve weeks of paid leave
- Provide a two-thirds wage replacement when a worker is on leave
- Provide job protection to workers who take leaves
- Raise the level of benefits available under Temporary Disability Insurance

**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 structured as an insurance program – workers are paid by the insurance provider when on leave, not by the employer. The employer can use the salary of the worker who is on leave 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. There should be no exclusion of workers from this program based on the size of the employer.

**Workers need up to twelve weeks of leave**

Nurses and physicians agree that twelve weeks of leave is the minimal time parents need to bond and care for newborns, with lasting impacts for healthy child development. This time period is also critical for breastfeeding, which provides major health benefits to both mothers and babies. When you look at the states that have paid family leave programs – California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island – the evidence shows that workers only take the time that they need. Many do not take the full twelve weeks.

**Workers need at least 2/3 of salary to make the benefit meaningful**

A wage replacement rate (the percentage of a worker's income the worker receives while on leave) of two-thirds will provide workers with the opportunity to actually take the leaves and still be able to support themselves and their families. This is particularly true for lower wage workers who spend most of their regular pay on necessities. Under a proposal of 50% wage replacement, a minimum wage worker would get just \$180/week. This amount is insufficient to allow them to take time off. Generally speaking, low wage workers have little to no savings. Low wage workers would not be able to afford to take the leave, although they have paid for it.

**Job protection must be guaranteed**

It is imperative that workers who take Paid Family Leave have job protection. Without these protections, workers run the risk of job loss, and subsequent need for public assistance which costs taxpayers money. Job-protected leave also has the benefit of keeping mothers in the workforce, and reducing the income loss women take when they become mothers. Forty percent of workers in the Rhode Island paid leave program would not have taken the paid family leave benefit without the job protection that the Rhode Island program guarantees, according to the analysis of their program.

**Increase Temporary Disability Insurance benefits**

The benefit for Temporary Disability Insurance has been stagnant at \$170 a week since 1989. This benefit is too low to protect workers from financial difficulties when they use it. A meaningful increase is necessary, and will ensure that workers can avoid financial hardship during a period in their lives when they should be more concerned with their family's health and wellbeing. For years I have seen the pain in the eyes of families that have grappled with the decision of leaving a sick child alone in the hospital, or a new mother crying at the thought of leaving her newborn in the hands of a stranger because she has to go back to work within the month. As a nurse, I have seen a broad spectrum of examples of how Paid Family Leave would benefit all New Yorkers. The Temporary Disability Insurance benefit needs to be raised to provide New York families access to financial stability during those times when they need it the most.

**NYSNA strongly supports paid family leave**

Now is the time for New York to establish a strong paid family leave program insurance program and through the FY 2016-17 budget we have the opportunity to do just that. The 37,000 members of the New York State Nurses Association 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.