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January 31, 2024

Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Bill Cassidy, M.D.
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Chrissy Houlahan
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Stephanie Bice
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Senators Gillibrand and Cassidy, and Representatives Houlahan, Bice, and Colleagues,

Thank you for your commitment to addressing the challenges that children and families face in accessing paid leave and identifying policy solutions for this problem. I am writing from First Focus on Children to express appreciation for the dedication of your bipartisan, bicameral Congressional working group and to highlight the tremendous benefits that paid family leave offers children.

First Focus on Children is a bipartisan advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families the priority in federal policy and budget decisions. As advocates for children, we are committed to ensuring that all children have an equal chance for success, including through supportive paid leave policies that enable families to continue working and maintaining financial stability while addressing parental, caregiving, and personal medical needs. We are encouraged by your work on this issue and urge you to keep children front and center as you consider the impact paid leave policies will have on the nation.

The lack of paid family leave for millions of U.S. workers routinely forces parents to make an impossible choice: continue earning necessary income, or forfeit that income and care for their newborn, sick child, family member, or themselves. Paid family leave promotes healthy child development, family economic security, and labor force retention by allowing parents and caregivers to maintain steady employment and income without sacrificing their family obligations. Research has also shown that paid family leave:

- Improves outcomes for children and families, including through better infant and child brain and language development regardless of socioeconomic status.^{1,2}
- Significantly increases breastfeeding rates and reduces incidences of postpartum depression.³
- Reduces infant mortality rates, which are disproportionately high in the United States. Experts estimate that a 12-week paid leave program would result in at least 600 fewer infant and post-neonatal deaths per year.⁴
- Improve maternal and infant health through decreased rates of intimate partner violence and rehospitalization, and increased pediatric health visits and immunizations.^{5,6}
- Increases the participation of mothers in the labor force by approximately 20 percent during the first year following their child’s birth.⁷ For instance, California’s paid leave program increased the average income of mothers with a 1-year-old child by \$3,407 and reduced their risk of dropping below the poverty line by 10.2 percent.⁸ California’s program also significantly reduced food insecurity among households following childbirth.⁹

To support these positive outcomes, a federal paid leave program should provide benefits for parental bonding, a worker’s own health condition, caregiving for seriously ill loved ones, needs related to military deployment, and leave to address sexual and domestic violence, and should also consider including bereavement leave for the loss of a child.

The United States needs a federal paid leave policy to ensure equitable access to paid leave and all the benefits it creates for families. The current patchwork of local, state, and private actions has proven to be inadequate. The U.S. is the only wealthy country in the world that does not offer paid

¹ Brito, N. H. et al. (2022). “Paid maternal leave is associated with infant brain function at 3 months of age.” *Child Development*, 93, 1030–1043. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13765>.

² Kozak, K. et al. (2021), “Paid maternal leave is associated with better language and socioemotional outcomes during toddlerhood.” *Infancy*, 26: 536-550. <https://doi.org/10.1111/infa.12399>.

³ Perry et al., “Association Between State Paid Family and Medical Leave and Breastfeeding, Depression, and Postpartum Visits.” *Obstetrics & Gynecology* 143(1):p 14-22, January 2024. | DOI: 10.1097/AOG.0000000000005428.

⁴ Patton, D., Julia F. Costich, J. F., & Lidströmer, N. (2017). “Paid Parental Leave Policies and Infant Mortality Rates in OECD Countries: Policy Implications for the United States.” *World Medical and Health Policy*, 9(1), 6-23.

⁵ Chen, F. “Does paid family leave save infant lives? Evidence from California’s paid family leave program.” *Contemporary Economic Policy*. 2023, 41(2), 319–337. <https://doi.org/10.1111/coep.12589>

⁶ Van Niel MS et al. “The Impact of Paid Maternity Leave on the Mental and Physical Health of Mothers and Children: A Review of the Literature and Policy Implications.” *Harvard Review Psychiatry*. 2020 Mar/Apr;28(2):113-126. doi: 10.1097/HRP.0000000000000246.

⁷ Abbott, Sam. “New Research Shows Paid Leave Increases Mothers’ Labor Force Participation Following CHildbirth.” Washington Center for Equitable Growth. March 2020. <https://equitablegrowth.org/new-research-shows-paid-leave-increases-mothers-labor-force-participation-following-childbirth/>

⁸ Policelli, Katherine, Alix Gould-Werth. “New Research Shows California Paid Family Leave Reduces Poverty.” Washington Center for Equitable Growth. August 2019. <https://equitablegrowth.org/new-research-shows-california-paid-family-leave-reduces-poverty/>

⁹ Lenhart, Otto. “The effects of paid family leave on food insecurity—evidence from California.” *Rev Econ Household* 19, 615–639 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-020-09537-4>.

parental leave at the national level.¹⁰ Thirteen states and the District of Columbia have enacted paid family and medical leave laws, and eight others have voluntary systems.¹¹ Though these states have acted and are seeing benefits for their residents, the need for a federal policy is clear: the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that only about 1-in-4 private sector employees has access to paid family leave, and Hispanic and Black workers are much less likely to have access than their white counterparts.¹² Of the lowest-income workers, only 6 percent have access to paid family leave.¹³ These inequities harm children and demand a federal paid leave policy that includes all workers, including independent contractors, part-time and full-time workers, and both public and private sector employees, regardless of industry or employer size.

Paid family leave is a vital support for children and their families that has both short- and long-term benefits. It is time for the U.S. to catch up to states, localities, and other countries in supporting its workers throughout their lifetimes with a universal paid leave policy. There are countless benefits to employers, workers, the national economy, and, importantly, children and their families across our country. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the importance of paid family leave policies for children, and we appreciate your work on this pressing issue. Please contact me if we can help in any way.

Sincerely,



Bruce Lesley
President, First Focus on Children

¹⁰ Francis, Ellen, Cheung, Helier, and Berger, Miriam. “How does the U.S. compare to other countries on paid parental leave? Americans get 0 weeks. Estonians get more than 80.” Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/11/11/global-paid-parental-leave-us/>

¹¹ “State Paid Family Leave Laws Across the U.S.” Bipartisan Policy Center. January 2024. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/explainer/state-paid-family-leave-laws-across-the-u-s/>

¹² “Racial and ethnic disparities in access to and use of paid family and medical leave: evidence from four nationally representative datasets.” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Monthly Labor Review. January 2019. <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2019/article/racial-and-ethnic-disparities-in-access-to-and-use-of-paid-family-and-medical-leave.htm>

¹³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Table 7. Leave benefits by average wage category, private industry workers, March 2022,” in “National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in the United States, March 2022,” September 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/charts/employee-benefits/percent-access-paid-leave-by-wage.htm>