

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM

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Opening Statement Chairwoman Carolyn B. Maloney

Hearing on “Examining the Need for Comprehensive National Paid Family and Medical Leave”

December 10, 2019

I am honored to be convening today’s hearing, my first as Chairwoman of the Committee on Oversight and Reform. As we continue to mourn the loss of our dear friend and Chairman Elijah Cummings—and as I sit here today in his chair—I am mindful of his lifelong mission to seek not only common ground, but higher ground.

With that in mind, I am very pleased to hold today’s hearing on an issue we have been fighting for, for many years—the need for comprehensive paid family and medical leave.

It is important for people to understand the current situation in our country. Right now, we are one of only two nations in the world that does not provide our workers with any form of paid family or medical leave.

I remember when I was pregnant with my first child, and I asked about my office’s leave policy. Do you know what they said? They said, “Leave? What leave? Women just leave.” I said that I didn’t intend to leave. And the response was, “That’s never happened before.”

That was an unacceptable answer for me then, and it is an unacceptable answer now for families across this country.

There are some basic and fundamental questions we need to face as a society. For example:

- If a young woman—a hard-working and promising employee—wants to have a baby and spend a few weeks caring for her newborn, should she be forced to go without any paid maternity leave at all? Or should we, as a nation, finally recognize that having a baby is a wonderful and predictable part of our employees’ lives that we should support?
- If a father’s two-year-old daughter is diagnosed with cancer, should he be forced to take leave without pay and face financial hardship in order to take his daughter to her chemotherapy treatments? Or should we, as a nation, do better by them?

- If a man who has dedicated his entire professional career to serving the American people has to help care for his wife after a stroke, should he be forced to leave the workforce altogether? Or should we, as a nation, value him and his contributions?

These are the questions that we, as policymakers, must answer. We are the ones who make these decisions.

I believe with all my heart that we need a policy that supports that hard-working young woman who is having her new baby, that supports the father in crisis who is caring for his two-year-old daughter with cancer, and that supports the dedicated husband who is helping his wife recover from her stroke.

Providing this benefit is a significant investment in our future—the future of children, parents, families and our future as a nation. Paid leave yields better outcomes for productivity, health of parents and children, and long-term financial stability. It also contributes to closing the gender wage gap.

There are some who disagree. They oppose paid maternity and paternity leave, and they oppose any type of paid family and medical leave.

But we are making progress in this fight that has been 35 years in the making to give parents and caregivers who work for the federal government time to care for their newborns, sick children, and other ailing family members.

Champions like Congresswoman Pat Schroeder, who was Chair of the then-House Civil Service Subcommittee, started this important workforce effort to respect parents and caregivers and help them balance the economic and emotional needs of having a family so they would not need to choose between their families and their jobs.

I have sponsored a bill for many years called the Federal Employee Paid Leave Act. In fact, previous versions of the bill passed the House twice, but we have never gotten it through the Senate and signed into law.

My current bill would provide federal employees—women and men—with 12 weeks of paid leave for the birth, adoption or fostering of a child, for a serious medical condition, or to care for an ill spouse or parent. The federal government is our nation's largest employer, and it should be a model employer for the nation.

Earlier this year, I was very pleased that the House passed these provisions as part of the National Defense Authorization Act. When it went to the Senate, we were not sure if it would survive. We had been fighting for so long, we did not know if it would finally happen. But over the past few days, an agreement was struck to provide for 12 weeks of paid leave, for employees at all federal agencies, when they have a new baby or adopt a child.

If this agreement is signed into law, it will be a tremendous victory for the more than 2.1 million employees across the country. Parents finally will be able to have a baby without worrying about their paychecks suddenly coming to a halt.

Now, this agreement is not perfect. The Senate refused to approve paid leave for medical reasons. For example, that father who needs to take his two-year old daughter to chemotherapy treatments would not be covered. And neither would the husband who needs to care for his wife recovering from her stroke. In addition, this provision covers only federal employees, so it does not cover anyone working in a private corporation or business. We will continue fighting for these Americans in the years to come.

But despite these drawbacks, this is an amazing accomplishment. Democrats made this issue a priority. I want to thank Speaker Pelosi, the Democratic Women's Caucus chaired by Reps. Lawrence and Speier who serve on this Committee along with Rep. Frankel, and the Congressional Progressive Caucus chaired by Reps. Jayapal and Pocan for their support.

And I would also like to acknowledge Rep. Gerry Connolly for his work on the issue. He is a tireless advocate. He held our Committee's first hearing in this Congress on this issue in his Subcommittee. He is also a tremendous negotiator.

He is one of our Committee's conferees on the defense bill, along with Rep. Stephen Lynch, who is also phenomenal. Together, they skillfully represented the interests of our Committee, our workers, and the American people in the negotiations with the Senate that resulted in this victory.

They also worked closely with Chairman Adam Smith on the Committee on Armed Services whose leadership and vision led us to this achievement, as well as our partner in these efforts, Democratic Leader Steny Hoyer.

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