

Written Testimony of Adrienne N. Schweer

Before the U.S. House Ways and Means Committee Hearing entitled:
In Their Own Words: Paid Leave, Child Care, and an Economy that Failed Women
April 21, 2021

Chairman Neal, Ranking Member Brady, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's important hearing.

My name is Adrienne Schweer. While I am here in my capacity as a Fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center, where I lead the organization's Paid Family Leave project, I am also here as a mother of four very young children, who like so many women across America, has been stretched to the bone by this pandemic.

As you know, the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) is a Washington, DC-based think tank that actively fosters bipartisanship by combining the best ideas from both parties to promote health, security, and opportunity for all Americans. In 2018, BPC launched a Paid Family Leave Task Force, led by Maria Contreras-Sweet, the 24th Administrator of the Small Business Administration, and former Senators Chris Dodd and Rick Santorum, which has urged Congress to strengthen our nation's paid leave policies.

Paid family leave is one of those rare issues that enjoys broad bipartisan support, not only across the country but here in Congress as well. Within the last few years, three bold bipartisan pieces of legislation have passed into law: 1) a new program providing federal employees with 12 weeks of paid parental leave; 2) an important bipartisan pilot program providing employers with 25% tax credits for extending paid parental, family caregiving or medical leave to low and middle wage workers which was extended for another five years; 3) and most importantly, Congress quickly acted to create an emergency paid family and sick leave program to support millions of workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The emergency family leave provisions in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) have gone a long way to helping workers. Thanks to the FFCRA, for much of the last year, parents facing school and child care closures were eligible for roughly 10 weeks of emergency paid family leave, while workers with COVID-19 or who are caring for a loved one with COVID-19 were eligible for 10 days of paid sick leave. Unfortunately, [analysis](#) has shown these important leave provisions may have only covered about 25 percent of workers and early IRS data shows take up rates were far from what was expected. Moreover, these benefits were not extended to cover new parents nor to those caring for aging loved ones.

As the title of today's hearing indicates, the pandemic has highlighted a long-standing structural problem: families are struggling to balance work and life – particularly women with children and women who are primary caregivers. These unprecedented challenges have now, over in the last year, turned into a full-blown crisis.

A major part of the solution is the creation of a robust, sustainable, and bipartisan paid family leave program that reaches our workers who need it most. Prior to COVID-19, [81 percent](#) of American workers did not have access to a defined paid family leave benefit and those who did have access were concentrated at the top income levels. Importantly, [only six percent](#) of workers with earnings in the lowest ten percent of weekly wages had access to paid family leave, while [34 percent](#) of workers with earnings in the highest ten percent of weekly wages had access to paid family leave.

I want to share with you some analysis that provides greater insight into the plight of too many working women today, in significant part due to lack of access to paid family leave benefits.

A [survey of women conducted last Fall](#) by Morning Consult and the Bipartisan Policy Center found that women were more than twice as likely as men to have left work during the pandemic due to child care responsibilities or school closures. Our survey showed that nearly 40 percent of women with children under the age of two had left the workforce, which was nearly double that of women with older children. Among all adults, forty percent were either women who had left work for caregiving responsibilities or knew a woman who had. I imagine many of us here today fall into this category.

[Another survey](#) by BPC and Morning Consult found that roughly a quarter of unemployment insurance recipients were spending most of their time caring for a loved one. Among parents not looking for work, nearly 60 percent cited caregiving responsibilities as the reason they were not in the workforce.

This data clarifies that for many Americans -- mostly women— employers and employees did not have the flexibility or tools needed to accommodate both work and the humane but time-consuming responsibilities of caregiving.

More recently, and despite the emergency paid leave policies passed by Congress the Kaiser Family Foundation found in a [March survey](#) that “one in ten working mothers with children under 18 said they quit a job due to COVID and half of this group cited school closures as one of the reasons.” The survey also found that “Three out of ten working mothers said they had to take time off because school or daycare was closed.” Shockingly, Kaiser found that “Almost half (47%) of working mothers said they took unpaid sick leave because their child’s school or daycare was closed. This rose to 65 percent among low-income mothers and 70 percent among those working part-time jobs.” Finally, Kaiser found that low-income women were more than three times as likely as higher income women to report quitting a job for a reason related to COVID.

Even without a pandemic, women are struggling to balance work and caregiving demands. A recent [policy memo](#) by members of the Science Policy Park at North Carolina State University found that over 40 percent of women in STEM careers move to part-time work or leave the STEM field entirely after having their first child. Women in STEM, especially early in their career, are over five times more likely than their counterparts in other professions to exit their field. The report found that paid leave policies reduced the departure of female employees by 20 percent in the first year after childbirth and up to 50 percent after 5 years in states that have implemented paid family leave policies.

The problem is clear, and the status quo is unacceptable. And I believe we have a solution. Emergency, patchwork measures can provide temporary relief, but they should not be mistaken for long term solutions. To achieve lasting change that will benefit our working women, children, families, businesses, and ultimately our country, we must look at the flaws in current federal law and fix them in a bipartisan way, leveraging regular order so a diverse set of stakeholders can be part of the process.

The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) passed in 1993 allows certain workers to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid time off from work for caregiving without fear of losing their job. While representing a historic milestone, the nearly three-decade old law continues to offer benefits and protections to approximately [60 percent](#) of the U.S. workforce. But unpaid time off is simply not affordable to many Americans.

What is to be done, then? To help answer that question I want to point to the flexible yet unshakable efforts of then-Senator Chris Dodd of Connecticut in getting the FMLA across the finish line in Congress and signed into law. This enduring law went through painstaking negotiations and numerous alterations, but from its earliest iterations, was a bipartisan proposal and passed with strong bipartisan support. The compromise that ultimately emerged has benefited millions of workers.

At the time, there were a lot of doom and gloom predictions about the damage a program like FMLA would cause to businesses and the economy. Looking back over nearly three decades of the law's enactment, it is safe to say the legislation that became law through regular congressional order, amendment, and compromise, these predictions proved to be inaccurate.

Today we hear similar concerns about expanding FMLA benefits to more workers and making them affordable by making them paid. However, many Fortune 500 companies are implementing leave policies on their own, and organizations like the [Business Roundtable](#) are supporting the idea of a national program.

Here is what we know: Today's economy leaves many working-age women—particularly women with children—behind; Paid family leave has been shown to have tremendous benefits not only in the lives of workers and their loved ones, but also in employee retention and in workforce participation.

We know the problem and have identified a solution. I would argue that the missing ingredient is a bipartisan effort that includes input from diverse stakeholders and, while it might make everyone lose a little, can bring compromise and long-lasting solutions. There are real design and pay-for issues that need to be resolved and they can be resolved. Nearly 30 years after FMLA, it is time for Congress to improve conditions for more working families with a robust, long-term, national paid family leave policy.

Hearings like this one today are critical to building the support and bipartisanship will needed to achieve this goal. I thank you and welcome any questions you may have.