



FIRST FOCUS

MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY

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March 26, 2009

The Honorable Fortney "Pete" Stark
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Stark:

I am writing on behalf of First Focus, a bipartisan advocacy organization committed to making children and their families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions, to thank you for your leadership in introducing the Family Leave Insurance Act of 2009 (H.R. 1723), legislation that would provide paid benefits to all workers who need to take time off from work to recover from an illness, care for a child or tend to an ill family member.

As an organization dedicated to improving policies for children and families, we support your proposal to develop a federal paid family and medical leave policy. As you know, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), signed into law in 1993, is a federal policy designed to help employees balance work and family life. Unfortunately, FMLA provides only unpaid leave. We applaud your efforts to build on the foundation of the FMLA and to provide families with a more comprehensive family and medical leave policy.

Today, in many families, both parents participate in the workforce, and adults serve as primary caretakers for young children and aging parents. According to the Bureau of the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 56 percent of women with children under age 1 are in the labor force. In addition, the majority of all women with dependent children under age 18 – 71 percent – are in the labor force. Yet the United States is one of a minority of countries that offer no legal guarantee of maternity leave to new moms. Although access to family leave has increased in recent years, far too many women are forced to return to work soon after birth. In addition, less than 7 percent of men have access to paternity leave. Moreover, close to two-thirds of Americans under the age of 60 can expect to be responsible for the care of an elderly relative in the coming years.

Given that FMLA leave is unpaid, the large majority of workers cannot afford to take leave to care for children or ailing family members. In fact, as many as 12 percent of workers report not taking time off to care for the seriously ill child due to a lack of pay. For many, opting to take time off means facing considerable financial hardship.

Ultimately, a paid family and medical leave policy is critical to ensuring the health of workers and their families, while also offering significant and measurable benefits for employers, workers, and taxpayers. Paid leave will help ensure that workers do not have to make the difficult decision of either sacrificing the care of a loved one or the financial security their loved ones deserve.

Paid family and medical leave also has a number of potential benefits. For instance, research indicates that providing workers paid time off work when needed to take care of their own health needs or those of members of their families is likely to lead to improved health outcomes for workers and their families, reduce absenteeism and decrease turnover. Ultimately, better health outcomes for workers translate to reduced health-

care expenditures and improved quality of life for children and families. Paid family and medical leave also has unique implications for child health. For example, research suggests that children have better short- and long-term health outcomes when they are cared for by their parents, including shorter hospital stays.

We believe the Family Leave Insurance Act will help us move toward the long-term goal of substantially improving the health of workers and families, and ensuring that our workplace policies protect families and promote productivity, improved health outcomes and quality of life for our children and families.

We are grateful for your leadership on this issue, and for all of your efforts to ensure that our nation's children and families receive essential service and supports. Thank you again for your support, and we look forward to working with you on this and other proposals to address the needs of working families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce Lesley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a blue color.

Bruce Lesley
President