

March 25, 2019

To: The House Business and Labor Committee and the Senate Workforce Committee
From: Kathleen Converse
Re: Support of HB 3031

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Kathleen Converse and I live in Portland OR.

I want to start by acknowledging that I was in a rare and privileged position to get paid time off to be with my son after he was born. I am a white middle class woman in her early 30's who works in higher ed. I was given 6 weeks of short term disability leave at 60% of my salary, but was able to use sick and vacation time to have a full 3 months off paid, and then to work part time from home over the summer, giving me over 5 months to be with my baby before going back to work full time. I also have a supportive partner, and a wide range of family and friends support. I realize that I hold a lot of privilege and advantages that made my experience easier. Despite this, I still really struggled the first few months after my son was born. My hope in sharing this narrative is to help highlight how necessary paid parental leave is for ALL new parents. Especially those who have to face intersecting systems of oppression on top of the already challenging job of adjusting to new parenthood.

I was in labor for over 50 hours with my son. The stamina of enduring nearly three days without sleep while in the most pain I have ever experienced was one of the most physically and emotionally taxing things I've ever done. We don't talk enough about how violent and graphic labor is. They brought out a mirror while I was pushing during birth to help me know when to push between contractions. The view of my distorted, swollen vagina as it ripped is a visual image I wish I didn't have in my mind. When the baby was finally born, holding his tiny 6 lb 11 oz body on my chest was the most overpowering emotion I have ever experienced. He curled up against me. I kissed his tiny cheek, and realized that he was blue and cold. I was too exhausted and depleted to fully register what was happening. My baby was not breathing and blue. He had just entered the world, and was at very real risk of leaving it again. The doctors whisked him away and sucked the goo out of his lungs. He was back on my chest within minutes, alive, pink, and eager to nurse. That moment of meeting and nearly losing my baby within minutes is a memory that will forever be imprinted on my soul.

For two days after giving birth, my vagina was too swollen to pee so I had to use a catheter. When my baby cried in the night I was too weak and in too much pain to even stand up and pick him up, My husband or one of the nurses had to bring him to me. There is deep pain in that. I take for granted my temporarily able bodied

privilege. It was humbling and hard to go from being able to run 10 miles without thinking about it pre pregnancy, to not being able to walk three steps to pick up my crying infant. The powerlessness of that, the vulnerability, and dependence on others were deeply challenging.

Over those next few weeks at home postpartum, I desperately needed time to sleep and rest and process the physical and emotional impact of what happened. Even having time off of work and family support did not allow for that to happen. Our new, sweet baby was insatiably hungry and eager to grow, wanting to nurse every two hours. Sleeping in 2 hour increments is not restful. I was exhausted and in intense physical pain. I had to wear a huge diaper with an ice pack and numbing spray. It hurt to move. It hurt to sit. When I could go to the bathroom I would waddle there with the ice pack between my legs, exhausted and depleted, and feeling like a stranger in my own body. My stomach hung like a kangaroo pouch, and felt vulnerably empty. My nipples were raw and in pain and sporadically leaking milk. I would be jolted out of deep sleep at 4 am to the sound of my baby crying, and wake up in a pool of breast milk and tears. Even if the baby did sleep for longer stretches, the image of him not breathing on my chest haunted me, and I had intense anxiety about him suddenly stopping breathing while he slept.

Without paid parental leave, this is when we expect women to go back to work. This is inhumane. This does not allow for the essential bonding time with a new baby and their parents. It does not honor the realities of labor, and the time needed to heal. This does not respect the rights and human dignity of people who need to heal, to process, to bond.

I was able to stay home for longer but my husband had to return to work. He was given two weeks unpaid time off to be with me. Two weeks is not nearly enough time. Being alone all day with the baby while still healing was incredibly challenging. It deprived my husband of key bonding time with the baby. Since I was breastfeeding and also home all day with the baby, the baby would soothe with me and not with my husband in those early months. This was deeply painful for my husband, and challenging for me. It also led to growing resentment about the inequities in our relationship and parenting, despite our best intentions to have an equal partnership.

This is why I support Paid Parental Leave. This is why I hope that Oregon does the right thing in giving all new parents paid time off to be with their new children whether or not they gave birth to them or adopted them, are mothers or fathers. New parenthood is a raw, vulnerable, exhausting, beautiful, important time. We must provide a way for parents to have paid time to honor this. Without it we will never achieve gender equity. Without it we reinforce sexism, racism, classism and other forms of oppression by creating stark disparities between those who can afford to

have time with their infants after birth and those who can't. Without it we do a disservice to all the new babies born in our state who deserve to have time with their caregivers as they are adjusting to life outside of the womb. They deserve to have caregivers who are physically and emotionally able to care for them. Instead we force new parents back to work immediately to be cogs in our capitalist system, instead of being honored as humans going through a physically and emotionally taxing life transition.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Converse