

March 25, 2019

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

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Kirstin Seitz and I live in Portland, OR.

I urge our Oregon representatives to enact statewide legislation to ensure financial protection for workers who take essential leaves for personal or family medical needs, including postpartum needs. I have lived-experience as a worker facing inadequate employer/public policy safety nets during times of necessary leave, including losing a job due to required surgery and returning to work postpartum in a physical condition that did not allow for me to fully meet my job duties.

After taking an unpaid leave after giving birth, I returned to work weeks prior to the 12 week period that my doctor recommended for the physical demand of my job. Upon returning to work, I attempted to push my body to perform at pre-pregnancy levels due to necessity to retain my job and earn an income. It was a choice that I would not have made had I had adequate supports to take the full 12 weeks off from work. This lack of choice between financial stability and my physical recovery and bonding with my child increased the stress of a period that is medically-accepted as being a high-stress stage. I remember thinking at the time about my individual responsibility to perform at a level that I simply could not, placing personal blame on myself for being inadequate because in America this over-demand on new mothers is such a norm. My exhaustion increased, my marital relationship suffered from the increased stress, and my newborn showed obvious signs of distress. I understood that psychological harm was happening to my entire family, but felt incapable of preventing any of it, as the larger issues of public policy was setting the stage I had no control over acting on. Three weeks following my return to work, I was asked by my supervisor to take another position at work, which in some regard was a demotion, as he blatantly claimed that my inability to physically keep up was the issue. I was able to keep my job, although I experienced shame from my employer for not being physically up to par. It took me years to acknowledge that this was not my personal flaw, that there are systemic issues in our legislation and market standards that are not family-friendly. I have since absolved myself from the internal guilt of my failure as a new mother to be able to juggle the tremendous demands of dual-earnship and meeting the needs of my new baby, although I am impassioned to ensure our legislature takes action to ensure these states of unnecessarily high stress can be absolved instead of families having to heal from the effects of enduring states of trauma in such a tender and important time of life.

As America is the only high-income country in the world to have no paid parental leave, even a 26 week leave that matches Washington commitment to employee security would make a substantial impact for our workers rights. While I would hope that our legislatures are educated about international policy comparisons, I think it is vital to stress the difference between European, Scandinavian, and Canadian policies that offer between 20-50 weeks of parental leave.

In addition having to return to work prematurely postpartum, I have also been negatively impacted financially by the absence of paid short-term medical leave. After receiving notification from a surgeon that I required a surgery, I was informed by my employer that I had to submit a letter of resignation or they would fire me without an ability to be re-hired. I voluntarily resigned, filed for unemployment while seeking supplemental work I could do from home, and had the employer dispute my unemployment claim (claiming they had never told me I had to quit or I would be fired). Fortunately, I received unemployment for a short duration but was unable to return to the employer and struggled finding new work due to post-surgery conditions for two more months. The leave my surgeon prescribed me was 12 weeks, had I had a 12 week paid leave with job-security (the private employer had less-than 25 employees so my scenario was excluded from FMLA) would have ensured I had adequate time for recovery and a smooth return to the labor force.

It is clearly time for Oregon to follow suit of other states that have taken initiative to provide this basic workers right. Please take into account the additional stressors that not having access to this right has on Oregon workers.

Sincerely,

Kirstin Seitz