

February 15, 2022

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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB8

Labor and Employment – Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program – Establishment (Time to Care Act of 2022)

TO: Chair Wilson, Vice Chair Crosby, and members of the Economic Matters Committee

FROM: Samantha Blau

My name is Samantha Blau, I am a resident of Baltimore's Patterson Place neighborhood, in District 46, and I live with chronic illness. I spend a significant amount of time arranging, traveling to, and attending doctor's visits and procedures. And I am lucky because I am often able to do these things for myself. But there are times that I can't drive myself home from a procedure, and I am again lucky because my husband is able to take off work and care for me.

At the age of 30, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Cancer is not a young person's diagnosis, and yet there I was, so exhausted every day that I would leave work and go home on my lunch breaks to take a nap, just to get through the rest of my day. Understanding my diagnosis was overwhelming, as was making decisions about my treatment. I did many of these things alone because my husband was not in a position to always take off time from work to join me in these doctor's visits. When I had surgery to remove my thyroid my husband had to go back to work for most of my recovery time. After this treatment we thought my health would improve, but instead it continued to decline. My fatigue continued, I had trouble finishing sentences or finding words when speaking, my legs and arms would alternate between pain and numbness, and my heart seemed to jump in my chest. I was diagnosed with a form of Dysautonomia called Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS), as well as Small Fiber Neuropathy. Not unlike Long COVID, POTS often appears after a person has a viral illness or autoimmune disease like the one that caused my cancer. These are life long diagnoses. There is no cure, only management. I see four separate specialists on a regular basis, as well as physical therapists. It took me two years to get my diagnoses under control, with so many appointments and procedures. And still, I can have a flare of symptoms at any moment that can leave me bed bound for days or longer. I am not wealthy, there is no at home care nurse for people like me.

My husband is my primary caregiver when I am unable to take care of myself, and this is the case for thousands of people like me. Society doesn't think about non-elderly adults needing a caregiver, but we are out here. There are so many of us living with a disability or illness that requires at least some regular attention. I am one of the lucky ones because my husband now has job security and paid sick leave that allows him to care for family. I am worthy of care, and so are those with spouses that can't afford to take time from work to care for them. The Time to Care Act is the least we can do for these families, the least we can do for people with chronic illness and/or disability.

I urge this committee to issue a favorable report on HB8 because being ill and/or disabled should not preclude you from care.