

Autoimmune Disorder Testimony Protection Act

Written Testimony by: Michelle Pickens of Annapolis, MD - Human Resources Specialist, Patient Advocate, Industrial & Organizational Psychology Master's Candidate

I was officially diagnosed with Crohn's Disease (an Inflammatory Bowel Disease) in 2015 after many years of misdiagnosis. At the time of my diagnosis I was unable to work due to the severity of my symptoms. Once starting on a biologic medication, my symptoms improved to the point where I was able to work, but being in an on site environment still was a challenge. I struggled working in a fully on site capacity from late 2015 until the beginning of 2020. I had some flexibility based on my manager's discretion, but no formal remote work policy. This led me to feel increasingly ashamed of my condition as well as "less than" in the workplace. At the start of the pandemic in 2020 I transitioned to fully remote work. I have been with two different companies since, both allowing me to work remotely. Being in a remote environment has helped me manage my condition because I am better able to control anxiety around having symptoms while at work. I am able to perform my job more effectively because I am able to be in an environment conducive to my condition. I have access to a more comfortable work setup that helps control my chronic pain. I have access to my own bathroom. I am able to avoid the stress of having to make bathroom stops during my commute. I am also able to take medication easily when I need it.

Not only does remote work make managing my condition more doable, it also helps me protect myself. The treatment for my Crohn's Disease is a medication I get through an infusion every 6-8 weeks. The medication (Remicade) lowers my immune system which leaves me at risk for more severe illness. Even before Covid, when I was required to be in the office I would wear a mask to protect myself during cold/flu season. Many times though this was not enough to protect myself since I was the only person wearing one. Many of my coworkers would come to work with non severe symptoms of an illness and I would end up developing a more severe illness that actually kept me out of work and from fulfilling my duties at home. Being able to work remotely has changed my life in a sense that I do not have to be involuntarily exposed to illness in order to keep my job.

It is indisputable that I have done the best work of my career thus far and contributed significantly to the companies I have worked for during the time since I have been able to work remotely. I believe all those living with autoimmune conditions should have the right to work at home in an environment that is safe and comfortable for them. I believe having formal legislation and policies around remote work will help to decrease the stigma of differently abled workers and will protect employees from backlash when seeking out necessary accommodations.

I can be reached for further questions or comments - 443-812-1956.