

SB 539: Time to Care Act

Statement of Victoria Bellard --- POSITION: FAVORABLE

Good afternoon Chairwoman Kelley and Vice Chair Feldman,

My Name is Victoria Bellard, and I have been the sole caregiver for my 88 year-old father who is currently in the later stage of Alzheimer's disease. He has lived with me since I found out he was in a nursing home in Texas in July 2013. Prior to that, I had not seen my father since 1984. I rescued him out of that facility where he had been medically neglected and abused and brought him home to live with me in December 2013.

I bought my Dad home at a time when I was coming close to the end of would have been a 40 year career as an educator. Little did I know at the time, that I was about to embark on a second career that without FMLA, would have made it impossible for me to take care of my father, landed me in the hospital or worse.

In the beginning of my caregiving journey, I thought I could do it all. Make the daily 150 mile a day commute to work, work full-time, and take care of my father and household. Boy was I wrong! I began losing sleep and losing weight; I went down to 98lbs. Stress and anxiety became part of my daily way of living. Until one day a colleague who saw me wasting away suggested I take look into taking Family Medical Leave. It helped save my life. Thanks to the federal Family Medical Leave Act, I was able to juggle taking care of my Dad, home and work for a few years. But I was one of the fortunate ones. I could not begin to imagine the devastating toll not having FMLA would have had on the health of my father and I, as well as the loss income and ultimately my home.

Juggling the riggers and logistics of caregiving, home and work began to improve once I started using my FMLA. However, it was not without a new level of stress and concern....retaliation from my superiors. Despite running a successful and thriving program for teen parents, I was exceded from my seven-year position as the program coordinator. The fact that the site I ran became the flagship site due to our graduation rate that, which was consistently higher than the national average among our population didn't matter. The fact that the direct result of the work I did allowed us to secure a 5 million dollar grant to expand the program from two sites to fifteen didn't matter. The fact that the program was chosen and evaluated by Mathematica and became an evidence based program didn't matter. I forced to leave the program that I helped build practically from scratch, poured my heart into and loved. Eventually, I had to take an early retirement. This resulted in a 55% pay cut and medical insurance premium almost 3x higher than what I was paying.

I urge a favorable report on this legislation, and the passage of a strong bill that protects the rights of Marylanders, so that they do not have to experience the injustices that I did. Please help us help care for our loved ones, maintain the dignity of work, and create a better Maryland.