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TESTIMONY ON HB496 - FAVORABLE
Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program-Establishment

TO: Chair Wilson, Vice Chair Crosby, and members of the Economic Matters Committee
FROM: Lisa A. Barkan

I am a resident of District 42B. I am submitting this testimony in support of HB496 Labor and Employment - Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program - Establishment.
Delegates Wilson, Valderrama, and Kelly

I am a retired Maryland Assistant Attorney General. I have lived through the illness and death of my son, Alex, who died when he was two and a half years old. He was gentle, sweet, headstrong, funny and quirky. He loved the color yellow, the letter F, the number 5 and fish. When he was about 15 months old, I asked him if he wanted to wear a red shirt or a blue shirt. He replied, "no mommy, yelyow (sic) shirt."

Despite the tragedy of Alex's death, I was lucky. Unlike many working Marylanders, I had a position where I accrued leave and my fellow employees could donate leave to me when I exhausted mine. I was able to care for and be with my son throughout his illness and receive paid leave. I was able to focus all my energy on taking care of my child. I did not have the added stress of needing to maintain a job. Above all, I was able to spend more time with him and to enjoy my child during his all too brief life. For these reasons, I wholeheartedly support the Time to Care Act.

When Alex was six weeks old, he was diagnosed with a rare liver disease. I frequently had to rush him to the emergency room, and on several occasions he was admitted to Johns Hopkins Hospital. His liver kept deteriorating. When he was eight and a half months old, he needed a liver transplant, and my husband donated a lobe of his liver to our son. Alex required extensive care for four months after his transplant. I took a four month leave of absence from my job. After I exhausted the leave I accrued with the State, my co-workers donated time to me. I was paid for the four months

Alex was fine for a year and a half. He then developed an aggressive cancer caused by the immunosuppressant he took so that he would not reject his liver. When my son was hospitalized for the last time, on September 11, 2001, I told my supervisor that I had to stop working. I could not juggle work and a critically ill child. A CT scan revealed that Alex had a tumor the size of a volleyball in his abdomen. The next day he was connected to a ventilator and given dialysis because his lungs and kidneys failed. He died on October 30. Again, after I exhausted my leave, my co-workers donated leave time to me, and I was paid until I returned to work.

I am so grateful for my co-workers who donated their leave time to me when I exhausted mine. Many working Marylanders cannot take care of their loved ones because they do not have paid leave or co-workers who are able to donate leave to them. No one should have to choose

between having to work or taking care of their loved ones. The Time To Care Act would create a strong paid family and medical leave program for all working Marylanders.

The COVID 19 pandemic has reinforced how fleeting and precious our lives are. We need to pass the Time to Care Act this legislative session. It provides working Marylanders with an ability to take a breath. It allows them some paid time off to take care of themselves or a loved one without fearing that they will lose their job or be unable to pay for food, rent or their mortgage. It allows Marylanders to share the last days of their loved ones' lives. I am grateful that I was able to take care of my son and to be with him. I cannot imagine losing any of that precious time. No one should.

I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on HB8.