

**Testimony in Support of HB 496 “Labor and Employment – Family and Medical Leave Insurance
Program – Establishment”**

House Economic Matters Committee February 15, 2022

FAVORABLE

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

FROM: Dr. Karen Ray

My name is Dr. Karen Ray. I am testifying in support of HB 496 which would establish a paid family and medical leave insurance program.

I have my doctorate in counseling psychology and am licensed in Maryland as a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor. Since beginning mental health work in Michigan many years ago, I have primarily worked as a generalist serving people living in poverty and underserved areas. In spite of my inclination toward generalist work, I have developed specialties in attachment theory and application, forensic mental health, trauma informed counseling, conducting evaluations, working with gifted individuals, socialization for violence prevention, and the early development of career choices. I have a private practice in Calvert County, Watershed Counseling Services, and continue to work in an underserved area with people living in poverty.

As a mental health clinician, I pay close attention to the mind-body connection that causes problems with medical illnesses and have seen its negative effects on people’s mental health and vice versa. When people are stressed due to sickness or injury, they are apt to have escalating mental health symptoms and diagnoses. If they are not able to take time off from work to care for their medical needs, the initial stress from their medical problem is increased and that compounds mental health problems. As their mental health problems develop, those have a negative effect on their physical healing. It becomes a vicious circle that is entirely preventable, would reduce our medical and mental health costs, and help our citizens. People need time to adjust to and cope with medical and mental health stressors. If financial or work obligations reduce the time for healing, people heal more slowly and experience more mental health issues.

There are similar effects for people who care about the injured or ill person. Those who could and want to provide care for injured or ill loved ones, often cannot afford to take leave from their jobs to care for loved ones. They may overextend themselves trying to help or may resign from their job to help their loved ones. The resulting stress and feelings of guilt can cause mental and physical problems for them. The negative mental health effects for the index patient and their loved ones have a ripple effect on other people. I cannot “catch” a person’s broken leg, but feelings of fear, worry, frustration, and stress easily affect other people.

People who return to work after injuries or illnesses prematurely because they lack paid time off impair their own medical recovery. I leave the testimony about medical effects to medical doctors. However, delayed or impaired physical healing contributes to mental health stress which can result in identifiable

disorders. A patient who just had a baby but goes back to work a few days later because she needs the paycheck, does not heal as well, may have increased problems attaching to her child, and have less emotional reserves for caring for the child.

I should mention that all of these exacerbations increase in the presence of other societal stressors such as poverty, racism, substandard housing, dangerous neighborhoods, trauma, , gender discrimination, or ability status. People's coping resources can be close to overwhelmed before an illness or injury, and an unforeseen medical emergency can be the final straw.

Nobody should have to make these choices that threaten their health and livelihoods. Thankfully, it doesn't have to be this way.

The Maryland General Assembly can help my clients and the whole state be healthier and more financially secure by passing HB 496. A comprehensive paid family and medical leave program will allow Maryland residents to better care for themselves when they're sick or injured, or for a loved one or newborn, without having to quit their job or lose needed paychecks. As a mental health clinician and Maryland resident, I respectfully urge this committee to return a favorable report on HB 496.

Thank you,
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