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**TESTIMONY ON SB355 - POSITION: UNFAVORABLE**

**Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program - Delay of Implementation**

**TO:** Chair Beidle, Vice Chair Hayes, and members of the Finance Committee

**FROM:** Lisa Barkan on behalf of Jews United for Justice

My name is Lisa Barkan. I am a resident of District 42B. I am submitting this testimony on behalf of Jews United for Justice (JUFJ) in opposition to SB355, Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program - Delay of Implementation. JUFJ organizes over 6,000 Jewish Marylanders and allies in support of local campaigns for social, racial, and economic justice.

During the 2022 session, the Maryland Legislature passed one of the strongest and most comprehensive paid family and medical leave programs in our country. The Family and Medical Leave Insurance (FAMLI) Program demonstrates the power government has to improve people's lives. This historic legislation allows Marylanders to take care of themselves or their loved ones for up to 12 weeks, without fear of losing their jobs or being unable to pay their mortgage or other critical expenses.

JUFJ, along with its partners in the Time To Care Coalition, supported amendments that provided additional time for the Maryland Department of Labor (DOL) to implement the program. JUFJ wanted to ensure that the program would be fully operational when DOL rolled it out. JUFJ believed such delays were necessary to allow DOL time to build the teams and infrastructure it needed to accept contributions, review claims, and pay employees benefits. Under the current statute, DOL would begin collecting contributions on July 1 of this year, and start providing benefits on July 1, 2026.

SB355 provides the DOL an additional two year delay to start implementing the FAMLI Program. Under SB355, DOL would begin collecting contributions from employers on July 1, 2027 and begin providing employees' benefits on July 1, 2028. This delay is unwarranted and dangerous.

Instead of furthering FAMLI's goal to aid hardworking Marylanders' by providing them essential funds when they have to take a leave from work to care for themselves or their loved ones, SB355 would needlessly harm many people.

Unfortunately, I know how important paid family and medical leave is. My son Alex was born with a liver disease. When he was eight and a half months old he needed a liver transplant. His doctors told my husband and me that one of us should remain home with him for four months after his transplant. At that time, I worked as an Assistant Attorney General in the Maryland Office of the Attorney General. My co-workers donated some of their leave time to me and I was paid for four months.

When Alex was two and a half years old, he developed an aggressive lymphoma which was caused by the immunosuppressant medicine. He was hospitalized in September and he died at the end of October. He went into the hospital and he never came home. My co-workers donated time to me once again and I was paid for the time Alex was in the hospital until I returned to work. There are other working parents who have critically ill children. They deserve a robust and accessible paid family and medical leave program.

The concept of practicing Tzedakah – engaging in acts of kindness that help others – is a core tenet of Jewish teachings. Psalm 82 instructs Jews to: “Defend the poor and the orphan, deal justly with the poor and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy.” Communities as well as individuals are directed to perform these sacred and powerful acts. According to the Torah, “Tzedakah exalts a nation,” (Proverbs 14:31) “and the work of tzedakah shall bring peace” (Isiah 32:17).

During 2022, this Legislature passed monumental legislation to support Marylanders. Since then, Delaware, Minnesota, and Maine passed paid family and medical leave legislation. Even without SB355’s additional delay, these states will fully implement their programs sooner than Maryland. Further delaying the operation of the FAMLI Program, affirms peoples’ views that the government cannot and will not act to aid its residents. Marylanders should join other states that have passed legislation and implemented paid family and medical leave programs.

Working Marylanders need and deserve paid family medical leave. They should be able to take a pause from work to care for and spend time with their loved ones without fearing that they cannot pay their bills. When my son was critically ill, my colleagues donated some of their leave to me, so I could care for and be with my son. I am very lucky that my colleagues were allowed to and chose to donate leave to me. I should not be one of the “lucky ones.” Instead, all Marylanders should have access to paid family and medical leave.

**On behalf of JUFJ, I strongly urge this committee to return an unfavorable report on SB355.**