Written Testimony of Tameka Henry

Prepared for the Subcommittee on Worker & Family Support

Good morning Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski and distinguished members of the committee. I am Tameka Henry, a devoted wife and mother of four from Las Vegas, Nevada. I come before you to share my story and advocate for the urgent need to have real paid leave for families across this country. My husband and I have been together 20 years. We have four incredible children, ranging in age from 12 to 18.

In 2006, my husband became disabled. He had been working at one of the luxury condominiums in town. Once he became ill, they let him go. I was working at an assisted living place, providing care to those with disabilities. For a long while, his illness was a mystery. We didn't know what was going on. My children would frequently call me to explain that they had to call the paramedics because he was so sick. Each time I'd have to take off without pay, then I lost that job. It was really tough because I'd become the sole breadwinner.

My husband finally got diagnosed with gastro-pareisis, an offset of diabetes and, eventually, he got the social security disability benefit, but it took six years and it's only $600 a month. His condition often requires me to take time from work which has resulted in my own inability to maintain employment. Every time I found a new job, it was like starting over again. I didn't have a chance to build up tenure. I would take jobs that had flexibility for time off, but always without pay. Yet, I still had to pay the bills.

Since my husband became ill, he's been in and out of the hospital, on average, 10-12 days per month. Not to mention the time I've had to take off when one of my children are sick; two of which have asthma. When I do the math, I estimate that I've lost close to $200,000 in wages since his diagnosis. Making our monthly bills is hit-or-miss, month-to-month, depending on his condition.

This hardship has definitely impacted other areas of our lives together. We can't even consider purchasing a home, a bedrock of the American dream. I've never made enough to pay for child care. It was always a catch-22. In Nevada, if you work and live in a two-parent household and one parent is home, you don't qualify for child care assistance, even if they're ill.

Ours is an impossible situation. Do I forsake my husband's health and our commitment to one another to keep my job and earn a living? Or, do I honor my family and prioritize the health of my husband and our children, even though it hurts us financially? These are the questions I grapple with every day.

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Today, things are a little different. I work for a small non-profit. I am fortunate that my boss is empathetic and understanding of the deep commitment I have to my family. And while I no longer fear losing my job, I do have to find ways to make up my lost wages because my employer can't afford to pay for time that I'm not working. Like many small business owners, she supports the FAMILY Act. If there was a national paid leave program, it would make a huge difference for her and for us.

As a country, we should be embarrassed that in 2019 millions of families are forced to choose between their livelihood or their loved ones. If the family is the bedrock of our society, then why does America lag every other country when it comes to supporting and strengthening families?

We can and we must change this by passing the FAMILY Act, so working people can pool small contributions and earn a portion of their pay while they take time to care for themselves or their loved ones. This bill will benefit 36 million adults who live with a disabled family member they are responsible for caring for. Based on my experience, this bill can save our government money because it would mean that I am able to sufficiently care for my husband and reduce the number of return hospital visits for recurring ailments. That's why I fight for paid leave and affordable child care for myself and for families like mine.

I became involved with Make It Work Nevada, which is part of the Family Values @ Work network. Thanks to the work of coalitions in our network, several states across the country have a paid family and medical leave program to combat this problem and I am glad to say that the sky didn't fall in any of those states.

Paid family and medical leave is good public policy. Eight in 10 Americans support paid family and medical leave programs despite party affiliation or demographics. Do you know why? Because caring for one's family isn't a partisan issue. It's an issue of compassion and an issue of love.

I want to urge you all today to vote our American values and support the FAMILY Act. I hope you will adapt the improvements that states have made to make sure the program is accessible and affordable to those who need it the most.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members, for allowing me to speak with you today.

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