

Testimony of Bethany Santos Fauteux

The House Ways and Means Committee Full Committee Hearing

“In Their Own Words: Paid Leave, Child Care and an Economy that Failed Women”

April 21, 2021

Thank you, Chairman Neal and members of the committee. It's an honor to testify here today on the need for paid leave and child care.

I am a state certified early childhood educator and in 2013 worked for a childcare center that did not provide paid leave — as most do not. Although Massachusetts requires that early childhood educators have a college degree and state certification, it remains a low-paid job, typically with no benefits.

In August of 2013 I gave birth via cesarean section to my son. In order to keep a roof over our heads, I had to return to work after only three weeks. As I sat on the floor taking care of other mothers' children, the pain of my C-section stitches didn't compare to the pain of not being with my own brand new baby.

About a year later, I stopped working in child care. I gave up a career I loved and know is so critical because I was able to make more money working in the food service industry.

Early childhood programs give kids the basis of everything they need for the rest of their lives - from the days of the week to sharing to keeping our hands to ourselves. Living in New Bedford, most of my students were poor kids of color with a childhood comparable to mine. I was proud that I could show them learning is fun and important, and be a positive figure in their lives.

No one tells you when you take out loans for your major that it pays minimum wage with no benefits. To be treated as if you're disposable was truly heartbreaking. I think care work is so undervalued because it's historically a woman's job — child care workers [earn poverty wages in 40 states](#).

In the restaurant, I was still a minimum wage worker, with the added benefit of tips and the ability to work more hours. It was a struggle but I wasn't drowning. And then the pandemic hit. Although we were essential workers, our hours were cut and more than half the staff was let go. I was kept on but it was very unstable. The daycare was shut down and my daughter, a middle schooler, was doing only virtual learning.

On top of that, my mother, who's 72, was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's. She hid it for a long time and stopped taking her heart meds. Before I knew how bad it was, I left my kids with her while I went to a dance meeting for my daughter. A little later, the kids called crying, saying my mom had passed out in the street. From then on, I became her caretaker too. There was no program she was eligible for.

When school opened for my son, things became even more unsure. In the age of Covid, if anyone has a cough or sneeze, you have to pick them up, get them tested. At one point, this was happening every other week. My hours got cut more — I understood, but it's an impossible navigation.

My lowest point came one day when the school called the restaurant to say I had to get my son, and then my mom called to say she was having a cardiac episode and I had come right away to take her to the hospital. I felt pulled in so many directions, failing in all of them. Would my boss cut my hours for the rest of the week? I was trying to be everything to everyone and failing at all of it.

Like so many women in this pandemic, I can't work and I can't not work. It's like two puzzle pieces came in the box but they don't fit together.

I'm constantly juggling the gas and electric bill — when one is about to be shut off, I deal with that one and hold off on the other. It's like a jenga game. I had to get advances at work. At some point your pride just goes. Kids need basic necessities. I even thought about talking out a payday loan when I was desperate. I can't let my kids go without water.

And I still have my student loans. I'm not paying anything right now. But when I did, I wasn't paying them off. I was just paying interest.

I got involved in the fight for paid leave and affordable child care when the Coalition for Social Justice approached me to help with getting legislation passed in MA for a \$15 minimum wage and paid family medical leave. I thought, I'm the 99% that doesn't have a trust fund, and these are basic human rights. Every other civilization has figured it out. Are the people who decide policy, who have paid leave thanks to my taxes, telling me I'm not important enough to have access to the same support?.

When I met CSJ, I felt like I met my people, ones who valued me and put that toward action and solutions. Today I'm speaking for CSJ, our national Network, Family Values @ Work, and for the Voices of Workers group of the Paid Leave for All campaign. We know that even before the pandemic, parents had to die alone, that nearly 1 in 4 new moms had to go back after only two weeks, that dads are made to feel they're not parents, that for many people, cancer treatment is what you do on your lunch hour or on the weekends. We need permanent solutions.

We are watching the disastrous effects when you don't provide a basic safety net and a natural disaster happens. It is sick and sad — and also avoidable. We can't go back but we can make sure it doesn't happen again.

Many of us have seen needed reforms get passed and we've been left out. So I implore you, please pass paid family and medical leave now. Make it affordable, make it secure, make it include me and the millions like me. We need to be sure the wage replacement is progressive, so that those who earn the least amount will get the highest percentage of their wages. We

have to make sure those who take the leave they need can return to their job. Otherwise, as we know from our own lives and as research confirms, many people who are eligible will not take the leave or will return to work too soon. And we need to be sure that the definition of family reflects what families look like in the real world — those we love and care for, those who care for us.

Making paid leave equitable for women, people of color, LGBTQ folks, isn't a favor. It's what will make it effective and sustainable for all of us.

Most people realize that we can't get to work if the roads are crumbling or there's no public transportation. The same is true if we lack paid leave or child care. We want to work and be self-sufficient. But we also want to take care of those we love. Look how many women, especially women of color, have dropped out of the workforce during the pandemic because they couldn't leave their kids home alone or had an aging parent or a loved one with a disability or with COVID who also needed care. Paid leave and care policies have the potential to help the economy grow as much as [5 percent](#) by bringing women's labor force participation rates in the United States up to levels in other countries.

Paid leave for all is the road to good jobs, the bridge to good health, the bricks and mortar of a thriving society. And it is the way to show the majority of people who are like me, that we matter to the people who dictate our well-being.