

Nija Phelps
Milford, CT

Nija is a grassroots activist living in Milford, Connecticut with her husband Matthew, their daughter Alexandria, and her mother-in-law Karla. She is experienced in community organizing, volunteering, and political engagement for local, state, and national advocacy groups.

Before moving to Connecticut seven years ago, she was active in the Purdue University Black Caucus of Faculty and Staff, the Purdue chapter of the National Organization of Gay Lesbian Science and Technical Professionals, and the Purdue LGBTQ Student Alliance. While living in Bridgeport, Connecticut she co-founded Fairfield Standing United, an Indivisible group.

Since then, she has run for local office and been Field Director, Communications Director, and Deputy Treasurer for the Ellen Russell Beatty 2018 State Representative campaign. She has partnered with organizations including Planned Parenthood of Southern New England, Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund, The Connecticut Campaign for Paid Family Leave, Family Values at Work, All In For Milford, Connecticut Black Women, and Women's March Connecticut.

She serves as a member of the Milford Transit Committee, Vice Chair of the Milford Government Access Television Committee, Milford Juneteenth Celebration Planning Committee Lead, and after four years as Chair of the First District in the Milford Democratic Town Committee she is now the Vice Chair of the Milford Democratic Town Committee. Nija has been an Office Manager (until COVID began) and Test Proctor at First Choice College Placement for three years.

Nija is known as an effective communicator, relationship-builder, and leader. She champions equality, equity, and justice by supporting legislation centering around: care such as paid medical leave, reproductive freedom, and healthcare reform; economic security such as rights to affordable housing, equal pay, and workers' rights; and societal betterment such as criminal justice reform, gun violence prevention, and environmental preservation.

She is inspired by Planned Parenthood's motto, "care, no matter what", forming alliances and striving to empower underserved communities through her continued volunteer work.

**United States Congress Ways and Means Committee Hearing Testimony:
“The Burnout Epidemic and What Working Women Need for A Stronger Economy.”
June 15, 2022**

**Nija Phelps
Volunteer for CWELF and FV@W
Milford, CT**

Thank you Chairman Neal and Members of the Ways and Means Committee for the opportunity to testify. It's truly an honor. I want my story to be known because, as a woman, I know firsthand how this pandemic fell largely on my shoulders and those like me - caregivers juggling school closures, housekeeping, and unstable work options.

My family could have used comprehensive, inclusive paid family and medical leave as long ago as 2014. Back then, my husband and I needed to quit our jobs in Indiana and move to Michigan to take care of his mother who was struggling with diabetes and needed us to be her caretakers for six months. Over time she was also diagnosed with cancer - we continue to care for her. If we had access to paid family and medical leave at that time, we might have been able to provide care without losing our jobs or leaving our home.

In the past few years, our need for paid family and medical leave has only increased.

When the pandemic started in 2020, I was pregnant for the first time. I was furloughed due to COVID-19 for nearly a year. When the baby came, my husband was able to take six weeks of paid leave. But when that six weeks was over, his job required him to go into the office part of the time. We didn't feel comfortable with the level of COVID exposure that was inevitable. We had a newborn and the care of his elderly, immunocompromised mother who lives with us – but we did what we had to do to keep his job.

Now, my husband has lost his job and I'm only back to work one day every other week, down from three or four days a week. We are in a state of constantly being on guard, trying to prepare best for whatever comes next and still stay on top of our finances and care for our family. My daughter is almost two and I'd like to put her in daycare, but the dangers of COVID persist and everything is expensive. The expansion of Unemployment Insurance and Child Tax Credits were a lifeline last year, but, since their expiration, we have had to dip into our retirement savings to care for our family, and I am worried about being able to keep up with the mortgage on our house. It's hard to feel positive and keep going when it doesn't feel like your present or future is stable.

Today I'm speaking as a volunteer parent advocate for the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund, Family Values @ Work, and the Voices of Workers advisory group of the Paid Leave for All campaign. I'm speaking for the sons and daughters who risk economic disaster to care for sick parents. I'm speaking for the one in four new moms who return to work only two weeks after delivering a child and are made to feel they're not real parents. I'm speaking for far too many people for whom cancer treatment is what you do on your lunch hour or on the weekends. And I'm speaking for those who live on the brink of financial disaster despite playing by all the rules.

It's time for a change.

Americans need quality, affordable, comprehensive childcare, places where our children can thrive and parents can afford to see them thrive.

The COVID-related policies, expanded Unemployment Insurance and Child Tax Credits, kept many struggling families afloat, and we must make these support systems easier to access and permanent for all.

We need paid family and medical leave so we can take the time to access that care for ourselves and our family members, without worry that we'll have to choose between our jobs and the people our jobs provide for. We need this holistic care for everyone, because everyone has, had, or will have a story like mine.

Thank you for your time and attention.