



October 25, 2023

To: US Senate Committee on Finance

From: Ben Verhoeven, President, Peoria Gardens, Inc. Albany, Oregon

Re: Exploring Paid Leave: Policy, Practice, and Impact on the Workforce

Good morning Chairman Wyden, Ranking Member Crapo and members of the Senate Committee on Finance:

Hello there. I'm Ben Verhoeven. I'm a second generation farmer and nursery owner. I run a family owned greenhouse in rural Albany, Oregon. I'm proud to say my 26 year-round and 24 seasonal employees receive great benefits which, in the big picture, don't cost me much, but mean a lot to everyone, and they're good for business. My workers can get paid family leave, which covers parental leave, medical leave and leave to care for a loved one. In addition to paid family leave my workers can get health care, paid vacation, paid sick time and a pension.

Many industry groups claim that policies like ours will hurt business.

That's just not true.

Paid family leave costs me less per year than truck repairs, and has a much greater effect on the lives of the people I work with.

Our farm began offering 12 weeks of full pay parental leave in 2016. We have since worked to help pass paid family leave for all Oregonians. Together, we can expand these benefits to all Americans.

Before my workers had paid family leave they told me stories of draining their retirement savings to care for a dying brother. This is now a thing of the past. I know a mother who no longer must rely on donated sick time to plan for a second child. I have seen a young man, raised by a single mother, grow into a strong and loving father of two. These are real stories from my workers, made possible by paid family leave.

In Oregon, under our state's new Paid Leave Oregon program, my farm can now provide paid family leave with my workers.

Opponents of paid leave will tell you that only workers benefit. Therefore, all the financial costs should fall on workers' shoulders. This is not true. As an independent business owner I benefit when my employees do not have to choose between their loved ones and a paycheck. As a farmer I benefit when my workers have a stable home life, which begets a stable work life.

Since offering paid parental leave in 2016 we have seen a return on our investment as valuable employees, including many fathers, return to work and future promotions. This helps my business prosper and grow.

As a business owner I also benefit from stronger, healthier, more resilient markets. Lessening the financial hardship of an illness, a birth, or a family crisis leaves more savings in people's pockets, savings that they can put towards homes and gardens.

As any farmer will tell you we are subject to the forces of mother nature. A crop failure affects our business in the same way a sudden illness affects a family. This is why I feel strongly that coverage should be expanded to include all businesses and workers. Life events like birth, illness and ailing parents happen to all of us, regardless of the size of company we work for.

I would also add that as a farmer and a small business owner, national paid family leave is a good bargain. I cannot afford comprehensive paid family leave on my own, which is why a program like the one we have in Oregon, is the best way forward. Our state's program costs businesses like mine less than offering stand-alone plans, and I know that my workers are also contributing.

As a small business owner, I am the HR department. Our state program has been much easier to set up than the private insurance options, also allowed under the new Oregon law, that we explored. Working with our state has been as simple as a software update to our payroll, and a pre-printed poster in the breakroom. Oregon's program manages the process, confirms a worker qualifies, and of course pays for the leave itself out of the fund. This is a real service, both for me and for my workers.

A comprehensive and permanent paid family leave program is good for workers, benefits employers and secures our economy for generations. It's the right thing to do for business. It's the right thing to do for workers.

Thank you.