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For years, workers across the country have spoken out in support of the creation of a national comprehensive paid family and medical leave program. In Connecticut, a broad coalition of advocates worked with legislators to pass a strong paid leave program in the 2019 legislative session. People of faith were vocal in this campaign because we saw the moral imperative of establishing this insurance program: that people should not have to choose between a paycheck and taking care of their health or the health of a loved one, or bonding with their new child.

Our faith teaches us that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. Establishing and implementing a comprehensive, inclusive paid family and medical leave program is a way we can show that love. When someone is suffering, they deserve to be able to focus on getting the care and treatment they need to get better. When we think of loving our neighbors "as ourselves" we must ask ourselves the question: What would I want for myself if I were sick, welcoming a new baby or taking care of my ill family member? What I want for myself, I want for you too.

We believe that each person is created in the image of God and has inherent worth and dignity. Every person deserves to be well and attend to their health when they are not. As a society, we should aim to break down the barriers to treatment and support, not perpetuate policies that inhibit well-being. Establishing a strong, inclusive paid family and medical leave program is a critical component of promoting the health and well-being of workers and their communities across the country.

The pandemic has underscored the depth of human interconnectedness, particularly how our health is often impacted by that of our neighbors and co-workers. A robust paid family and medical leave program benefits all of us, whether or not we are ever in a position to need to use it. As people of faith, this is precisely what we mean when we talk about promoting the common good. Out of our interconnectedness comes a responsibility to each other, and a shared interest in healthy outcomes. When people are able to take care of their health without fear of losing their paycheck or their job, our collective community is healthier.

Keeping employees connected to the workforce through supportive policies such as paid leave also has significant economic benefits. Research has shown that access to paid leave helps keep new mothers connected to their employer. Widespread closures of day cares and in-person schooling during the pandemic was one of the main drivers of so many women leaving their jobs or reducing their hours of paid

employment. The overwhelming and unsustainable reality of trying to maintain employment while also caring for a child or children at home has illuminated the need for various policy changes to better support working parents.



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The exodus of over 2 million women from the workforce during the pandemic has also shown the devastating impact that separation from paid employment can have on families as well as the wider economy. According to an estimate in a 2020 collaborative report from the Century Foundation and the Center for American Progress, "Even as small a shift as 1 percent of mothers leaving the workforce would result in an estimated $8.7 billion economic hit to working families."

And since working families do not live in an economic bubble, an impact on a parent's wallet also affects what that parent has available to spend in the local economy and how they are able to provide for their family. We know that when women leave the workforce, it becomes more difficult for them to become reconnected to paid employment in the future, sometimes with lasting impacts on

their earning potential. Paid leave can play a key role in supporting consistent workforce participation, particularly for women.

Paid leave is particularly important for low-wage workers who are less likely to be able to take unpaid time off when an illness occurs or when they welcome a new child to their family. A worker with a minimum wage job is no less worthy of having access to job protected, paid time off to care for their ill, elderly parent than a higher-wage earner. This benefit should be available to all who need it and should include a high level of wage replacement that would enable workers, especially low-wage workers, to be able to afford to take the needed leave. Families and communities will benefit from a national embrace by policymakers of a paid leave program that is inclusive and accessible to low-wage workers.

Paid leave is not only an economic justice issue, but also a racial justice issue. Women of color, who make up a large share of frontline workers, are leaving the workforce at twice the rate of white women during pandemic times, according to the Marshall Plan for Moms campaign. Longstanding gender and racial pay inequities add to the financial stress and complex decisions around managing caregiving and employment for many women, with decisions by women of color further impacted by the racial wealth gap.

These compounding injustices make it harder to take unpaid leave, if it's even offered. As 79% of Black mothers nationally were breadwinners for their families in pre-pandemic times, it is critical that we implement supportive policies that will make it more possible to attend to the health needs of one's family while maintaining paid employment.

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We cannot afford to wait any longer for a comprehensive, national paid family and medical leave program. Past efforts in Congress to create such a program have not been successful. Now, more than a year into a global public health crisis and with a supportive president at the helm, a federal paid family and medical leave program could become a reality.

Congress should support the Biden administration's inclusion of a paid family and medical leave program (modeled after the FAMILY Act) in the American Families Plan

or as a standalone bill in order to secure this vital insurance for all workers. Now is the time for people of faith to speak up: Members of Congress need to hear from their constituents about the difference paid leave would make in their lives in order to compel them to action in this moment. Let us not be afraid of proclaiming the moral imperative of enacting policies that affirm and protect the well-being and humanity of working families and our entire workforce.

[Rachel Lea Scott is the associate director of the Collaborative Center for Justice, a Connecticut social justice organization sponsored by six congregations of women religious.]

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