



NORTH DAKOTA SENATE

STATE CAPITOL
600 EAST BOULEVARD
BISMARCK, ND 58505-0360



Senator Erin Oban

District 35
1319 Apache Street
Bismarck, ND 58501-2632

R: 701-955-3188
C: 701-527-1642
eoban@nd.gov

COMMITTEES:
Education
Political Subdivisions

HB 1441 – Paid Family Leave

House Industry, Business, and Labor Committee

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, for the record, I'm Erin Oban, here today representing District 35 in the North Dakota Senate, as a cosponsor of HB 1441, as a working mom, and as someone who fundamentally believes that paid family leave can make a significant and positive difference in the lives of North Dakotans across the entire life span.

I've realized over the few years I've served in the legislature that, generally speaking, we're a pretty privileged bunch. I include myself in that. To be clear, Mr. Chairman, privilege doesn't mean we don't work hard, and privilege isn't a bad thing – not at all – as long as we don't let it cloud or inhibit our ability to see the challenges that others might face just because maybe we haven't. In the situations we're referencing in describing the need for paid family leave, I have faced them personally.

In December 2015, after weeks of declining health, my dad – a strong, funny, hard-working 66-year-old North Dakota farmer – was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Though the doctors wouldn't (and probably couldn't) give him an exact time he had left, everything he found on the internet said he had anywhere from 3 months to a year, tops. By the time we got home from Mayo, he had lost so much weight and strength and ability to fully care for himself that he required full-time caregiving. You won't be surprised to learn that he didn't want to live out his remaining months in a nursing home, so from that day forward, 24-hours a day, 7-days a week, my mom, with the help of my two siblings and me, took care of him. We rotated duties, but the bulk of the responsibilities fell on my mom. Thank goodness she and my dad were retired and financially secure. There's no way we could have managed this situation if she was still needing to work.

In the midst of this, my husband, Chad, and I were in the middle of the adoption process, and by mid-February, we had been matched with a birth mom, due on May 10th with a little girl.

Alongside the anticipation of becoming first-time parents, things swiftly and steadily declined for my dad. Doctors appointments and blood transfusions 3-4 times a week, multiple medications and chemo pills with side effects that would counter each other, inability to sleep and eat and use the bathroom - his determination to keep up that routine was became as tired as his body did. He made an agreement with me to continue treatment until we arrived home with his granddaughter.

On May 7th, the morning before Mother's Day and our anniversary, we received a call, but not the one we were expecting. Birth mom had gone into the hospital in the middle of the night, and that baby girl was delivered stillborn around 9:00 am.

Three weeks later, on June 1, 2016, my father died.

Needless to say, Mr. Chairman, my work was not my priority, but paying my bills wasn't a choice. So, I kept working through it all.

Then, just a few months later and after being matched with another birth mom, on October 2, 2016, our son was born. In preparation for this and knowing full well that I couldn't possibly devote myself fully to both my job and a new baby and be prepared for the upcoming legislative session, I quit my job. Not because I wanted to, and financially, not because it was easy for us to manage. Frankly, I didn't feel much option otherwise. In addition to the unbelievably important bonding time that's necessary for ANY parent and new baby, no matter how they arrive, we had also been wait-listed for childcare until April, so returning to work quickly wasn't an option. I spent those crucial months on an unpaid maternity leave with our new baby, and my mom tagged back in with full-time caregiver duties when session began.

I don't share any of this for sympathy or pity. I share it because, although maybe these things don't happen to everyone all at once, they happen to most of us at some point. Those are the situations that nearly every working North Dakotan will face at some point in their professional careers. Adult children take care of dying parents; spouses take care of each other if they're seriously hurt or injured or sick; people have babies. And in those most stressful or painful or wonderful times, the most developed nation in the entire world continues to make people choose between caring for a new baby, taking care of themselves, or being with their most loved ones as they face their last days, and earning a paycheck. Even if YOU went through this, if YOU made it work, if YOU were able to manage it, many, many, many people that you represent can't. That's not good for families, for workers, for employers, for anybody.

In 1989, in testimony given to the Senate IBL Committee by my late father-in-law, Rep. Bill Oban, a cosponsor of a family leave bill, he stated, "How often have you heard people say that they yearn for the "good old days" when family took care of family? I believe that family still wants to care for family. Our society and our workforce has changed. With both spouses working, it becomes more difficult for family to care for family unless some element of security is available. It may not be the way we want it, but it's reality."

He goes on to share a February 13, 1989 Newsweek magazine article outlining the need. In 1989. "We are the only industrialized country (aside from South Africa) that has not faced up to what is happening to young families as they try to cope with working and raising children. Indeed our disappointing record of supporting families and children suggests that we are one of the least child-oriented societies in the world."

It's 2021, and we haven't made much progress on this as a country. So, let's change that as a state. In North Dakota, we pride ourselves on being pro-life, being pro-family and pro-family values. I would suggest there are few proposals we debate that are more pro-life and pro-family than paid family leave.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, many of us are at very different points in our lives. Some of us are in the early years of our professional lives, trying to strike a balance in starting or growing our family and paying off student loans, our mortgage or rent, and car payments. Some of us are mid-life, maybe lucky enough to just now be facing the reality of losing our aging parents. Maybe your own kids are getting married, having kids of their own but not sure they can do it without some financial security. And some of us are getting older ourselves, facing some significant health challenges, maybe already have lost a spouse. If you can't recognize how many of your constituents could benefit from having this opportunity to participate, think about what you want for your own kids, your grandkids, who you want there with you when you're nearing the end of a well-lived life. I know where I would be. I think you know where you would be. Let's make sure a paycheck isn't the reason that others can't be where they need to be.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration of HB 1441.