

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee.

My name is Rachel Richter Lordemann, I am the President of the Williston Area Chamber of Commerce in Williston, ND. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak this morning and provide testimony in support of HB 1441.

As I am sure you are all aware, recruitment and retention of workforce is a top priority issue in Western, ND. Even amidst a global pandemic, there were an average of 888 online job listings each month in 2020 in Williams, Divide, and McKenzie Counties. Filling these workforce needs is not only essential to the operation of our area's energy industry, but also to quality of life as we need to fill jobs in areas like education, medicine, professional services and retail. These needs are only exacerbated by a struggle to find affordable housing and childcare. Local leaders work tirelessly to address each of these issues, and support from state agencies and the state legislature is critical as we work towards strengthening the workforce in our small communities.

That is why I am encouraging support of HB 1441. An optional, Paid Family Leave Program would provide North Dakota businesses an incredible tool to help attract and retain employees. Paid Family Leave can often be seen as a corporate luxury, however, HB 1441 provides a flexible, low or no cost option for businesses of any size, including the roughly 86% of all North Dakota businesses with fewer than 20 employees, to support their employees through parental leave and times of other medical need.

There will come a time in almost every person's career where there is a need to take some type of leave, whether as a parent, caregiver, or for their own medical needs. The absence of Paid Family Leave doesn't make those needs go away, just makes it more difficult to retain and support employees through those times of need. Employees are too often forced to take extended unpaid leave, or may leave their job altogether when they find themselves with a significant need for leave that is unsupported by their employer.

Listing a job, interviewing, hiring, and training for each open position can cost a business thousands of dollars and, on average, a month in lost productivity. While FMLA of course protects an employee's job during a medical leave of absence, offering paid family leave will help to encourage employees to return to their jobs after a medical leave, create a culture that prioritizes the health and well-being of employees, and helps to promote lifelong employment and loyalty.

I want to specifically highlight that this program's effects on maternity leave would be a game changer in a business' ability to retain young moms in the workforce and could help to mitigate one of our area's greatest challenges to growth by encouraging industry workers to relocate their families with them to North Dakota and put down permanent roots.

Allowing families to feel secure in the financial stability offered by a paid family leave program would make a huge impact in seeing many of our open, high need jobs filled by qualified young women who until now have not chosen to relocate with their partners, or

who have chosen to stay home rather than enter the workforce as a young mom and caregiver.

In simplest terms, this bill will give small businesses the opportunity to provide an additional benefit to hard-working North Dakotans. At the Williston Area Chamber of Commerce we often say that our business community is “stronger together” and a business’ strength comes from the commitment, expertise, and hard work of it’s employees. A Paid Family Leave Program gives small businesses a fantastic tool to retain expertise, bolster employee loyalty, and create a workforce culture that prioritizes the health and well-being of employees and their families.

Finally, I want to commend the bill sponsors for creating a program that is optional. While I do believe this Paid Family Leave program has many benefits for small businesses, it is also important that we do not put regulations on businesses that would require them to fund or participate in this specific benefit. So, I want to emphasize how important that is is that this program optional and flexible.

I would encourage the committee to recommend a Do Pass on HB 1441.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Rachel Richter Lordemann

President, Williston Area Chamber of Commerce

[rachel@willistonchamber.com](mailto:rachel@willistonchamber.com)

701.770.6798