



Testimony of Marilyn P. Watkins, Ph.D., on H.B. 2364, before the House Committee on Commerce and Labor, January 23, 2002.

I'm Marilyn Watkins, from the Economic Opportunity Institute. I'd like to thank the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today in favor of House Bill 2364. Since this legislature adopted the Family Care bill in 1988, three changes have taken place that make passage of these modifications necessary.

First, the percentage of women in the workforce has continued to increase. Today, 61% of women over age 16 are in the wage labor force, including three-fourths of mothers with school-aged children. In the majority of married couples, both spouses work.

Second, our population is aging. This means both that the workforce is aging, and that more workers than ever have responsibilities for elderly parents and grandparents. Already, 22% of households provide care for older family members, and this number will continue rising as baby boomers age and life spans lengthen.

The third change is an increase in the number of hours at work. In the year 2000, the typical worker in the United States spent a full week more on the job than in 1990. According to the United Nations, Americans lead the world in the number of hours spent at work, with the average American working 3 1/2 weeks more annually than our next closest rival.

Not surprisingly, in a statewide poll taken last year, 66% of respondents said they were concerned about getting time off work to care for an ill family member, and 61% said they were concerned about getting time off to care for an aging parent.

About half of all workers have paid sick leave, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, typically accrued at the rate of 1 day per month. The incidence varies widely: 96% of full-time public employees have paid sick leave, but only 13% of part-time private employees; 81% of private sector professional and technical workers have sick leave, but only 38% of blue collar and service workers.

The movement by employers over the past several years has been to more flexible use of sick leave or personal time off to accommodate family needs. The State of California adopted a law similar to H.B. 2364 covering all public and private employers in 1999. In our state, most public employers including the State already allow use of sick leave for medical care of family members, and so will incur no additional costs. Major private employers, including the Boeing company, also already have similar policies. However, many companies continue to handle individual needs on a case-by-case basis, or to deny use of sick leave for family care. The most vulnerable workers are the ones with the least access to flexible workplace policies.

Experience has shown that family friendly policies help companies retain good employees, improve productivity and morale, and don't hurt profitability. In fact, reliability and unscheduled absences tend to go down when workers can be honest about the reasons they need leave, and can deal with family medical issues in a timely fashion. Experience has also shown that sometimes laws have to raise the minimum standards. With two thirds of our economy based on consumer spending, supporting the economic security of working families is the best way to boost our state's economy. Workers, families, businesses, and the whole state will benefit from passage of this bill.