

March 20, 2007

Testimony on 2SSB 5659 – Family Leave Insurance

Hi, my name is Justin. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my family's experiences so the committee can better understand why Family Leave Insurance is so important.

When my wife Nicole was pregnant with our son Kirby, she was working full time for her company. She did this until the weekend she went into labor. I was working 30 hours a week and attending school as a full time student at Western Washington University.

Given our situation at the time our finances were planned to the dollar; her maternity leave coupled with holiday benefits were taken into account, which would allow her to stay home with our son for two full months. This situation included me getting as much overtime as possible and did not include me taking any substantial amount of time off to be with my wife and child. Shortly before the weekend our son was born, Nicole was informed that she would receive no holiday benefits and was unable to take vacation intermittently during her maternity leave. This was a surprise to my wife and me because all our planning fit well within the guidelines of her employee handbook. She was referred to the fine print in her handbook, which alluded to the company's right to change policy without prior notice. Needless to say this came as a shock to us. We then had to adjust our budget and Nicole had to return to work around the holidays in order to receive benefits for those days. This along with her employer's recent choice to switch to a higher insurance deductible forced her to return to work two weeks earlier.

When Kirby was born, I was able to stay with my wife and child for one day having to return to work. This was a great emotional stress on me; I had to work ten hour days in order to make money we needed to pay tuition and bills, and on the days I was not working I was spending ten hours at school. My wife was in no condition to be alone at home, either, since after Kirby's birth she could not leave her bed upon doctor's orders. I was not there to provide any care for her, to make sure she had enough water, enough food, or to help her tend to own new child. Had Family Leave Insurance been available we could have afforded to have me spend time at home with my wife and newborn insuring their safety and tending to their needs.

This experience was still a joyous one; no person could take away the happiness that our new child has given to us. But it could have been a much smoother transition to becoming a family had we been given some extra support. I remember the calls from my wife on the days she was debating with her work about her benefits, under a large amount of stress, almost nine months pregnant, and crying wondering how we were going to make ends meet. After Kirby's birth she struggled being home alone, laboring to get down the stairs to eat, and worrying about carrying our child down the stairs in her condition. For the first two months of my child's life I received word about his small accomplishments through phone calls. My schoolwork suffered, due to my increased time at work and my duties at home. Had we had some supplemental monetary support much of the stress of this time could have been alleviated. It would have offered me more time together with my wife and new son; those precious first few days were lost to work. Please consider that our story is not the only one of its kind. Many families struggle around the time that a child is born; foremost in any person's mind should be their new child, not the stress of finances. This is why Family Leave Insurance is a necessity in Washington state.