

TESTIMONY OF:

Heather Whaling
Founder and President
Geben Communication

IN SUPPORT OF:

House Bill 91
To enact a statewide paid family and medical leave insurance program
House Insurance Committee
February 12, 2020

Chair Brinkman, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Minority Member Boggs, and distinguished members of the Ohio House Insurance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of Ohio House Bill 91, the Paid Family and Medical Leave Act. My name is Heather Whaling, and I am the founder and president of Geben Communication, a small business located here in Columbus with 27 employees. In 2016, I was named the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year for the Midwest region, encompassing Ohio/Kentucky/Indiana, and in 2018 I received the National Association of Women Business Owners Visionary Award. My advocacy for paid family leave was a key reason I earned these accolades. It's an issue I feel strongly about, both as a business owner and a parent.

In 2013, I was pregnant and went into labor five weeks before my due date on a highway, somewhere between Columbus and Cleveland. With no warning, suddenly my contractions were two minutes apart. We drove to the nearest hospital, where a sign said horse and buggies this way ... cars that way. This tiny, rural hospital didn't have the technology, expertise or equipment to deliver my son, who was in breach. We were life-flighted to another hospital, where I had an emergency C-section.

My son, Evan, was moved into the NICU, where he spent 13 days. For nearly two weeks, I was singularly focused on doing whatever I could do to get him healthy and home. During this time, I never wondered if I'd have a job to go back to or if I'd get paid for this time away from work.

That's because four years earlier, I launched Geben Communication. I'm the boss. Of course, I'd have a job to go back to, and of course I'd get paid. But, that's a luxury most Ohioans don't have. Nationally, only 19% of employees – and only 4% of low-wage workers (the people who need it most!) – have access to paid family leave through their employer. Becoming a new parent in any circumstance is stressful enough. I can't imagine going through that experience while also panicking about my employment status or wondering how to pay the bills.

Around that same time, my company was approaching 10 employees and we needed to formalize some policies. This was around the time when Netflix, Etsy and Facebook introduced incredible leave policies, offering four ... five ... six months of paid leave as a perk in their talent wars. That length of leave is almost impossible for a small business owner like myself to provide. Not because I don't want to, but because the absence of a statewide paid leave policy means I'm self-funding this employee benefit.

Paid leave is too important to be relegated to a fancy, Silicon Valley perk. I knew I needed to do something for my team. In April, 2016 I introduced Geben Loves Families, our paid parental leave policy. We provide 10 weeks of paid leave, plus a two-week transition period, to all new moms and new dads, whether they give birth or adopt -- at 100% of their salary. Since then, we've had five moms take leave and we have a new dad who will be taking leave starting in mid-March.

Other business owners considering a paid leave policy often ask me how we make it work. As a small business, how do you manage the workload and how do you figure out the dollars and cents? My answer is always that it requires careful planning, but it is doable.

I have to acknowledge that my business is a professional services firm, and we're fortunate to be in growth mode. That means we have strong profit margins, which positions me to self-fund this benefit for my employees. Other businesses with tighter margins or slower growth have less financial flexibility, which means they can't offer paid leave, even if they want to. The lack of a statewide, funded paid leave policy is creating a prohibitive financial burden for business owners.

In Ohio, 46% of employees work for small businesses. Small business owners like myself want to offer this benefit to employees because we know offering paid family and medical leave is a smart business decision. Paid leave helps us recruit top talent. It also improves employee retention, which saves employers money through reduced turnover costs. It's expensive to recruit and train new employees. Paid leave also increases worker productivity and improves employee loyalty and morale. At Geben, we conduct an employee engagement survey twice a year and paid leave is often cited as one of the top reasons employees are so proud to work for my company.

While more companies are beginning to offer their own versions of paid leave, it's not nearly enough to support families in Ohio. A funded, statewide policy will accelerate progress. Access to paid leave shouldn't be the luck of the draw. It should be a right for every worker in this state. We need you on this Committee to act because paid leave is good for families and good for business. I know this as a mom and a business owner.

Family is the backbone of our state, which is why businesses across Ohio have been stepping up to the plate with family centered-policies at their workplaces including the Cleveland Clinic, Ohio Health, and Smuckers. Small businesses like mine have also been implementing paid leave policies because we know it's what's best for our employees and their families. But, you shouldn't have to win the boss lottery to have paid family and medical leave so you can be there for your family in these big life moments. Too many people are left out. In fact, 62 percent of Ohioans do not even qualify for *unpaid* leave under F.M.L.A. The need for a state policy is critical.

Paid family and medical leave is life-changing for families and game-changing for businesses.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 91. I ask that you continue this necessary conversation on paid family and medical leave by holding additional hearings on the topic, and if possible, giving even more notice for the hearing so additional business owners can come in from other parts of the state to voice their support. In the meantime, I am available to answer any questions here this morning or by email at heather@gebencommunication.com.