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Paid Parental Leave for City Workers
 Testimony to Portland City Council
 December 2, 2015

My name is Lawrence Wallack and I bring more that 40 years of working to advance the public's health to my testimony today. Currently I am Professor and Director, Center for Public Health Studies at Portland State University and Distinguished Fellow of the Moore Institute for Nutrition and Wellness at Oregon Health and Science University. My comments are my own and are not intended to represent any polices or positions of these institutions.

Today you are considering a policy to provide paid parental leave for city workers. I can say to you with confidence that this is good public policy and good public health policy. I have reviewed a body of US and international research on this topic and found the evidence of positive impact to be strong.ⁱ A listing of studies and articles reviewed is presented at the end of my written comments.ⁱⁱ

I want to offer a brief framework that provides additional insight and urgency to the value of this kind of policy. Recent research on the developmental origins of health and disease and the related science of epigenetics is rooted in several important findingsⁱⁱⁱ:

1. The most critical time for human development is the period that spans pre conception through the first 1000 days, or up to about age two. This is the time when the risk for a wide range of chronic diseases and mental health problems is determined. And it is also a period when our cognitive abilities and the likelihood of school success are established;
2. Our genes are not a rigid blueprint for our future health and well-being but rather a collection of infinite possibilities, switched on-or-off depending on the well-being our mothers experienced prior to and during pregnancy and on the nutrition and care we received as infants;
3. The main environmental factors that influence how our genes operate are nutritional stress and social stress. These early stressors create biological impact which influences our well being across the life course.

The proposed parental leave policy is good public policy because research indicates that it produces a number of positive social outcomes. This policy promotes equity because it takes an opportunity that is enjoyed by relatively few people and extends it to others. Some of the specific outcomes established include:

1. Increased amount of leave that both new mothers and fathers take;
2. Increased amount of time the father spends caring for the child;
3. Increased economic and employment security for families; when women return to work see an increase in wages and number of hours worked;
4. Promotion of gender equality by better sharing workload and roles and responsibilities;
5. Reduced high school drop out rate (2%) and increased wages at age 30 (5%) with greater impact for children whose mother had fewer than 10 years of education, as indicated by a 30-year study in Norway.

6. Increased equity as greater benefits accrue to those who are in lower quality jobs, unmarried or single mothers, and women of color and those who suffer disadvantage in general (reported in the Norway study but also in shorter term US studies).

It is good public health policy in large part because it is directed to the developmental stage of life that is most critical for future health and well-being. Evidence suggests that job protected paid leave is associated with better mental and physical health for the mother; both short and long term. Better health for the baby and reductions in low birthweight and infant mortality. The positive benefits are linked to:

1. Reductions in maternal and family stress though increased social support and financial stability;
2. Increased available money to invest in needs of new baby;
3. Increased time available for well-baby visits and immunizations; and,
4. Increased duration of breast feeding.

A few things to keep in mind:

1. The availability of *job protected paid leave* likely allows women to use sick or vacation leave (if available) during pregnancy which may provide benefits to the developing baby that influence birth weight and infant mortality. This is leave that otherwise would have to be saved for the post delivery period.
2. All studies show that the longer leaves result in increased positive outcomes. The few paid leave programs that do exist in the US are far below the average of 18 weeks paid leave provided by our comparator OECD countries. A duration of six weeks will likely yield positive benefits but will still be far behind what we should aspire to as a caring community.
3. The California experience^{iv} (implemented in 2004) showed that a paid family leave program for the general population could be implemented in a way that produced positive outcomes for small businesses and none of the adverse consequences predicted by business lobbies. Thus, business could be an important ally in expanding this benefit to the non governmental sector in Portland.

In conclusion, this modest but very productive policy would put the city of Portland in the forefront of investing in its workers and caring for the next generation. This is an important step but still needs to be considered as part of a much-needed longer journey.

ⁱ The research focuses on various types of leave – parental leave, family leave, maternity leave. None of the research focused specifically on paid leave for municipal employees. I have tried to summarize what is known from the overall issue of “job protected paid leave.”

ⁱⁱ Aitken, Z., Garrett, C., Hewitt, B., et al., “The Maternal Health Outcomes of Paid Maternity Leave: A Systematic Review,” *Social Science and Medicine*, 130:31-42, 2015.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Barker, D., The Developmental Origins of Adult Disease, *Journal of the American College of Nutrition*, 23:sup6, 588S-595S, 2004. DOI: 10.1080/07315724.2004.10719428

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^{iv} The California Paid Family Leave policy provides six weeks of partially paid leave and almost all private sector workers are eligible. The policy is funded through a payroll tax on employees.