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Testimony for Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee

Hearing on the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA)

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Good afternoon Senators and friends, my name is Marcel Reid and I am a member of the DC chapter of ACORN – the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. I am here today to share with you my personal story about my own use of the FMLA and to urge you to protect and expand this vital law.

ACORN is the country’s oldest and largest grassroots community organization of low and moderate income families. We have over 350,000 members in 105 cities – fighting to improve our lives and get our members involved in their communities and in the civic process. I like to say ACORN’s work helps reduce what I call the “Poverty Tax” – the extra tax that poor people pay every day because they have fewer resources and more hardships.

For years, ACORN has taken the lead in fighting for a living wage and other protections for workers and their families. We see the FMLA as an important protection. At the same time we recognize that because it is unpaid – many low and moderate income families will never enjoy its intended benefits.

Today I want to share my own personal experience with FMLA to illustrate why our organization is committed to protecting and expanding this law. I hope you will truly hear what I have to say, because I care a great deal about this issue.

I took leave under the FMLA in 2003 to be by my mother’s side during her final struggle with an extremely aggressive cancer.

Now, I think I’ll just go out on a limb here and say that none of us in this room would be here today if it weren’t for our mothers. I owe my mother everything – and there was no where I could have been during that time other than

by her side, caring for her when she needed me like she had done for me all my life.

Taking time off to be with my mother was one of the best decisions I have ever made. During those final weeks together, we grew even closer and I would not give up that time for anything.

But my mother also taught me to be an honest woman. And I'd be lying if I told you that taking that leave was not a sacrifice.

At the time I took my leave, I had a fairly good job with a fairly decent salary, yet it took me nearly a full year to right myself financially. I was forced to use up my savings and - because loss income compounds itself - I wound up over charging on my credit cards as well.

Despite the financial setbacks I suffered, I know I was one of the luckier ones. I know many other ACORN members – and families like ours – who cannot even DREAM of taking advantage of FMLA because they simply can't afford the unpaid time off. Just another example of the Poverty Tax I mentioned - robbing low and moderate income people of their ability to meet their basic needs and support their families. We can do better.

My mother's last lesson for me was how to die with dignity, and for that I am eternally grateful. I believe that every worker deserves the right to say a final goodbye and every worker needs to be able to take care of themselves and their family when real need arises – without worrying about financial ruin.

I understand that the Department of Labor has come out with regulations that would make the FMLA *less* accessible to workers. Well, I'm here to say that's heading in the WRONG DIRECTION. We should be sitting here today coming up with way to insure that *every* American worker can take job protected PAID LEAVE when they need to. To reach its full potential – and for workers and their families to do the same – this law needs to be *more* accessible and affordable for workers – not *less*.

Our workers and our families are America's greatest resource. We are only human. And we are *fully* human. It's time we started treating each other that way.

My mother lived her life hoping to see the world better and in a small way I hope sharing the story of her death will help do that. Thank you for listening to my story. I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you today.