



**Testimony of Portia Wu, Vice President, National Partnership for Women & Families
Before the House Education and Labor Committee,
Subcommittee on Workforce Protections
“H.R. 4855, The Work-Life Balance Award Act”
April 22, 2010**

Chairwoman Woolsey, Ranking Member McMorris Rodgers, Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here to testify on behalf of the National Partnership for Women & Families (“National Partnership”). I particularly want to thank Representative Woolsey. As the lead sponsor of the Balancing Act, the FIRST Act, and the Domestic Violence Leave Act, you have truly been a tireless and effective champion for working women and men.

I am Portia Wu, Vice President at the National Partnership, a non-profit, non-partisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, access to quality health care, and policies that help individuals meet the dual demands of work and family. The National Partnership led the eight-year fight to pass the Family and Medical Leave Act and is a national leader in advocating for laws that help workers meet work-family demands. We are pleased to support the Work-Life Balance Award of 2010 and urge the Committee and the House to consider it as soon as possible.

This legislation comes at a critical time. Women now make up half of America’s workforce, and their incomes are increasingly important to families’ economic survival. At the same time, women continue to have primary responsibility for family caregiving. Today, four out of ten mothers are the primary breadwinners in their households and two-thirds of mothers contribute significantly to their families’ income.¹ Working men are also investing more time in child care.² And many more Americans are assuming eldercare responsibilities³—a trend that will intensify as our country’s population ages.

But while our society has changed, our public policies have not kept up. Our single national work-family law, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), provides only unpaid leave.⁴ It has helped millions of workers over the last 17 years, but there are many challenges facing working families that the FMLA does not address. Millions of workers are not covered by the

¹ Heather Boushey and Ann O’Leary, *Our Working Nation* (March 2010) 1.

² Ellen Galinsky, Kerstin Aumann, James T. Bond, *Times Are Changing: Gender and Generation at Work and at Home*. (Families and Work Institute 2009) 14-17.

³ *Caregiving in the U.S.* (National Alliance for Caregiving 2009) 15.

⁴ The FMLA provides leave for workers to address needs arising from a serious illness; the serious illness of a minor child, spouse, or parent; or to care for a new baby or newly adopted or foster child without fear of losing their jobs. The law was recently amended to allow the families of military members extended leave to care for an injured servicemember or veteran and to address qualifying exigencies arising out of the deployment of a family member.

FMLA at all, and many of those who are cannot afford to take the unpaid leave the law provides.⁵ The United States is the only industrialized nation with no national policy to ensure that workers are financially able to take time off for day-to-day medical needs, serious illness or to care for a new child.⁶

The economic crisis of the past two years and the shrinking job market have intensified the problem. Already-vulnerable workers fear that they will risk their jobs and economic security by taking leave, asserting their rights and sometimes even by exploring their options.⁷ In this kind of climate, recognizing workplace policies that enable men and women to meet family and health needs without sacrificing their jobs and income is more important than ever.

Strong work-family policies not only benefit workers and their families, they also benefit businesses. Such policies boost worker commitment, productivity, and morale, and employers reap the resulting benefits of lower turnover and training costs.⁸ And both employers and the public benefit from reduced spread of disease and lower health care costs when employees and their families can seek preventive care or attend to urgent medical conditions.⁹ With these benefits for businesses, families, our economy and public health, it is no wonder that the overwhelming majority of Americans support common-sense policies that help workers meet the dual demands of work and family.

The National Partnership welcomes the opportunity to work with Congress and the Administration to address these urgent needs. That starts with a national dialogue about government policies that help workers meet these obligations.

An important first step is recognizing employers that have already adopted family-friendly policies. We applaud the work that organizations like *Working Mother Magazine* have done to raise the profile of these issues by highlighting businesses that help employees honor their family commitments. And we believe that the national award proposed by this legislation would serve as a powerful additional incentive for companies to adopt strong work-family policies.

⁵ A survey commissioned by the U.S. Department of Labor found that 78 percent of employees who qualified for FMLA leave and needed to take it did not do so because they could not afford to go without a paycheck. *Department of Labor 2000 Survey Report*, www.dol.gov/whd/fmla/toc.htm.

⁶ Jody Heymann, et al, Center for Economic and Policy Research, *Contagion Nation: A Comparison of Paid Sick Day Policies in 22 Countries*, May 2009, www.cepr.net/index.php/publications/reports/contagion-nation:-a-comparison-of-paid-sick-day-policies-in-22-countries/.

⁷ See Evercare/National Alliance of Caregivers, *Survey of the Economic Downturn and its Impact on Family Caregiving*, April 2009 (workers report that the recession has caused them to be more concerned about taking time off to provide needed care for others) www.caregiving.org/data/EVC_Caregivers_Economy_Report%20FINAL_4-28-09.pdf.

⁸ See Christine Siegwath Meyer, *Work-Family Benefits: Which Ones Maximize Profits?*, *Journal of Managerial Issues*, vol. 13, no. 1, Spring 2001; Corporate Voices for Working Families, *Innovative Workplace Flexibility Options for Hourly Workers*, 2009 <http://www.cvworkingfamilies.org/system/files/CVWF%20report-FINAL.pdf>.

⁹ Jonathan Heller, Human Impact Partners, *Health Impact Assessment of the Healthy Families Act*, 2009, www.humanimpact.org/psd.

While the bill leaves it up to a selected Board to determine the criteria used to confer these awards, we respectfully suggest some key requirements that should be met, so that the award recognizes true best practices that benefit employees and employers.

First, the award process should recognize the importance of work-family policies that provide paid sick days for workers to handle immediate medical needs and obtain preventive care for themselves and their families, as well as longer-term paid leave to address chronic and serious medical conditions. And because there are many family needs in addition to those related to healthcare, we recommend that the Board recognize the value of workplace policies that permit employees to structure flexible work arrangements. We also recommend that the scope of family members covered by these policies be drawn broadly to encompass the reality of modern families.

In addition, it is critical that policies recognized by this award apply equally to all workers at a company. Finally, workers should be able to avail themselves of offered leave or flexible arrangements without being penalized or losing opportunities for promotion or higher wages.

We also believe that policymakers, businesses and the public would benefit from broader and more detailed information about the scope and type of work-family policies being adopted in the private sector. We therefore recommend that the awards process involve the collection and dissemination of data about companies' work-family policies. This could include data about availability and uptake of work-family programs.

We hope the Committee will consider these recommendations as it moves forward with this legislation.

In conclusion, the National Partnership for Women & Families commends and thanks the co-sponsors of this bill. We look forward to working with you on this and other legislation that will benefit working families.