

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Lynn Woolsey
Chairwoman, Subcommittee on Workforce Protections Subcommittee
Field Hearing on “Family-Friendly Leave Policies: Improving How
Workers Balance Home and Family”
Monday, June 9, 2008**

I want to thank everyone for coming here to Hauppauge, New York for this field hearing on balancing work and family.

I especially want to thank Representative Bishop for hosting the Workforce Protections Subcommittee in this wonderful location.

And thanks to his staff and the crew here at the William H. Rogers Legislature Building for all of your work in preparing for the hearing.

In Congress, Mr. Bishop has been working diligently on behalf of working families. Just recently the House passed his bill, H.R. 4744, which will clarify that airline attendants and pilots are covered by the Family and Medical Leave Act. So you see, FMLA can be improved.

Congressman Bishop will no doubt elaborate on what this legislation does, anyway we hope he does, in his opening statement.

The Subcommittee on Workforce Protections and our members are dedicated to finding solutions so that workers in this country can better balance work and family.

During the Congress, so far, the Subcommittee has held three hearings on balancing work and family. Today we will focus on the issue of paid leave.

Balancing work and family is a challenge for most of us, and it is important that, we, as a nation address this issue.

As the cost of living increases and wages remain stagnant, Americans work longer hours and often commute longer distances to be able to pay the bills.

If children have two parents, which is not always the case, both parents are probably in the workforce, so our job is to help those parents bridge both of their jobs: 1) their employment and 2) their family.

Americans dream of economic independence, a secure future, and a good life for their children.

However, for most Americans this dream is slipping away.

Gasoline costs are sky-high and other household costs are going up rapidly as well.

I was a human resource professional for 30 years, from the 1970s until the 1990s, a working mother as well. And now I watch my children balance work and their families. It is not easy!

No worker should be put in a position where choosing between the job or the family is necessary. One policy that helps to relieve such stress is “paid family and medical leave.”

Unfortunately, there is no existing federal policy on paid leave, and only a handful of states, including my home state of California, as well as New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and now Washington State provide paid leave.

It is true that there are some wonderful companies—such as KPMG, our witness here today—that provide paid leave to its employees.

But despite evidence that such leave actually helps not hurts the employers’ bottom line, the number of employers providing paid leave—especially maternity leave—is less than it was 10 years ago. Can you believe it? We, the wealthiest nation in the world, are regressing!

Amazingly, even without paid leave, workers manage to get by. But, we can do better for our workers and their families than “getting by.” We can bridge work and family.

We will be hearing from Julienne Condos, whose coworkers from St. Charles Hospital have generously contributed their own vacation time to her so she and her husband can get along financially while coping with her diagnosis of acute leukemia.

We will also hear from George Blekas, who has been able to take family and medical leave to care for his wife who has breast cancer.

But that leave is unpaid, and while Mr. Blekas has been able to take the leave knowing that his job is secure, his family has gone from a comfortable life to living paycheck to paycheck.

Reports tell us that there are countless others who, while eligible for leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act, do not take it because they simply cannot afford time off without pay.

This is not to say that we aren’t making any progress in providing family and medical leave to people who need it.

Just this year the President signed into law the first-ever expansion of the Family and Medical Leave Act, my legislation, to provide six months of leave to workers with wounded servicemembers.

The legislation also allows families to take leave from work in the even a family member is deployed overseas.

I am proud to have sponsored the legislation but we need to go further and make it paid leave.

The U.S. is lagging behind the rest of the world in providing paid leave.

A study of workplace policies in over 170 countries found that the U.S. was one of four countries—with Papa New Guinea, Swaziland and Liberia—that did not have paid sick leave for new mothers.

That is unacceptable.

And so this session, I reintroduced the Balancing Act which puts into place a whole host of family-friendly policies, including a provision for paid leave.

And on April 22, I, along with my colleagues Chairman Miller, Representatives Stark and Maloney introduced H.R. 5873, the Family Leave Insurance Act, which will provide workers with 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave.

We must adopt paid leave policies because workers should not be put in a situation where they are forced to choose between keeping their job and caring for their family.

I am looking forward to hearing everyone's testimony today.