

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to speak. My name is Brittany Elam, and I'm here today on behalf of Kentucky Voices for Health and as a Kentuckian who cares deeply about family well-being and the public workforce.

Let me start by saying that we are grateful to both the legislature and also now the administration for recognizing the importance of paid parental leave and paid family medical leave – two very important and different forms of support for working families that the policies attempt to speak to. These regulations take an important step toward healthier families and better employee retention.

While this will no doubt benefit thousands of state employees at some point during their public service careers, we think the administration should go further. The current policy only offers 6 weeks of paid leave once every 10 years - for childbirth, adoption, or medical needs.

Now, unless families are expected to schedule their births, adoptions, and medical emergencies like dentist appointments, this simply doesn't reflect reality for most families.

As part of our outreach, we collected comments from 75 Kentuckians, many of whom are state employees. Over and over, we heard the same thing: while the policy is a step forward, the 10-year restriction and 6-week leave mean many employees won't be able to use the benefit more than once, even if they have more than one child along with a serious health condition.

One of my own colleagues, someone many of you may know, just gave birth to a beautiful little boy. She was responding to emails shortly after his delivery! But while she was on leave, she lost child care coverage for her twins due to the flooding in April, and now her mother's health has declined dramatically. Her husband is a state employee who, if the timing were a little different, might have otherwise benefitted from the 6-weeks of leave, but currently, they are both burning through PTO and looking for a child care center that can take 3 children at once. This is their reality as caregiving demands are nearly unnavigable some days. Kelly and John's reality is not unique, many families face these obstacles, and this is a clear example of how unpredictable and overlapping family needs can be.

Each committee member should have received a document this morning with all the public comments submitted in response to this regulation, but I did want to highlight some of what we heard. 75 Kentuckians, many state

workers, called the 10-year limit unrealistic for growing their families. Nearly half of the respondents reported having more than one child, by birth or adoption, less than 10 years apart, meaning they would have been ineligible for leave for both children under this policy. Others described needing more than 6 weeks to recover, or running out of leave before the arrival of their child due to complications during pregnancy. One worker tied the lack of leave to her experience with perinatal mood and anxiety disorder. Many said 6 weeks should be the baseline, not the cap.

These stories are not outliers, they represent a clear and urgent theme: families need flexibility and support, not more restrictions. A 2020 study from March of Dimes and American University found that states with paid parental leave policies for their workforce saw a 20% drop in the number of women leaving their jobs in the first year after welcoming a child, and up to a 50% drop after five years. Research also suggests that 12 weeks of paid leave is essential, especially for those recovering from childbirth. Returning to work after just 6 weeks, particularly following a C-section, can jeopardize the health of both parent and child. Other experts have found that good paid leave policies have contributed to the overall health and development of children, noting an 18% reduction in respiratory infections and a 27% decrease in RSV hospitalizations among infants under 8 weeks old.

What's more notable is that states like Georgia, Louisiana, and Tennessee allow leave every 12 months. Kentucky's once-per-decade limit would be a national outlier. It would also put us behind 36 other states and D.C. that already offer more flexible policies for their public workers.

Again, while we are grateful for the recognition of the importance of paid parental leave and paid family medical leave policies, we urge this body to consider future legislation or an update to the current regulation to make paid family leave an annual benefit for a full 12-weeks. This not only aligns with Family Medical Leave Act standards, but also the standards President Trump approved for federal employees in 2019. No family lives in predictable 10-year increments, and no one should be forced to choose between financial stability and being present during a critical life event. Paid parental leave and paid family medical leave are not mutually exclusive policies and with your leadership, we have the ability to not treat them as such.

Thank you again for your consideration and for allowing me to speak.