

**REMARKS OF THE HON. ROSA L. DELAURO**  
**SENATE HELP COMMITTEE TESTIMONY: HEALTHY FAMILIES ACT**  
**TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2009**

Good morning. Thank you, Chairman Dodd, for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee today, and for all your leadership on behalf of the American people. Through your hard work and tireless advocacy, we now have the Family and Medical Leave Act, the Child Care Development Block Grant, and countless other measures that help American workers and families. I thank you for your continued commitment to this cause.

I speak today not only on an issue of basic fairness, but one of growing importance to our economy, particularly given our experience with the H1N1 virus this year. And an issue to which my friend and your colleague, the late Senator Kennedy, was passionately committed: paid sick days.

I believe that paid sick days are a basic question of right and wrong, as did Senator Kennedy. Yet, unlike 145 other nations,

including 19 of the top 20 most economically competitive countries in the world – that is to say, everyone but us – the United States does not guarantee a single paid sick day to workers – not one day. The FMLA, which covers 60 percent of the workforce, is, as we all know, unpaid leave.

As such, right now 57 million Americans cannot take time off work when they are sick, or when they need to stay home to care for an ailing child or elderly relative. In fact, almost half of all private sector workers – and 79 percent of low-income workers – do not have a single paid day off. The numbers are particularly galling in the food service industry, where only 15 percent of workers have paid sick days. Suffice to say, food service is not an industry where we want employees showing up to work with contagious viral infections.

All of these workers are forced to put their jobs on the line every time they take a day off. According to a 2008 study, one in

six workers report that they or a family member had been fired, suspended, punished or threatened with firing for taking time off due to personal illness or to care for a sick relative.

To my mind, this is completely unacceptable. It goes against who we are as a nation. But, even if you do not agree that providing paid sick days is a question of basic American values, there is more to this issue. Establishing paid sick days is also about economic competitiveness, income security for families, and, as H1N1 has proved to us this past year, primarily the public health.

In fact, “presenteeism” – the practice of coming to work sick – costs our national economy more than it would cost to provide paid sick days. According to one study, \$180 billion is lost annually, meaning that, right now, employers pay an average of \$255 per employee per year in lost productivity, more than the cost of absenteeism and medical and disability benefits. So, the argument that we cannot afford to institute paid sick days right

now does not hold water – In fact, the opposite is true: passing paid sick days would boost productivity.

For all of these reasons and more, Senator Kennedy and I first introduced the Healthy Families Act five years ago. Our bill would require employers with fifteen or more workers to provide seven days of paid sick leave annually for their own medical needs or to care for a family member.

We reintroduced the bill last May, and have almost 120 co-sponsors in the House and 21 co-sponsors in the Senate. This legislation is also supported by a broad coalition of over 130 state and national groups, including the National Partnership for Women and Families, the American Association of University Women, Moms Rising, and Business & Professional Women.

Paid sick days has always been a good, common sense idea, but, in light of the recent H1N1 epidemic, it has also become a

necessary one. Since H1N1 was first diagnosed and the dangers posed by widespread infection have been recognized, we have seen countless public health officials, and even the President, take to the airwaves to ask folks to follow a simple guideline: If you get sick, stay home from work or school and limit contact with others to keep from infecting them.

And yet, following this critical advice is virtually impossible for far too many Americans right now. The President has wisely called a national emergency to deal with H1N1, but in this economy, too many workers cannot answer the call. In fact, the convergence of a deadly contagion like H1N1 spreading in this economic climate could well be catastrophic. Right when more and more workers are feeling economically vulnerable and afraid to even miss one workday, we face an extraordinarily serious health risk that spreads much more quickly if the sick do not stay at home.

That is why I am also happy to be working with the Chairman on emergency legislation that will address the need to act now on this issue. Our emergency legislation would reflect the core principles of the Healthy Families Act. It would allow workers, not employers, to decide when they are too sick to work and when they are healthy enough to return. It would cover caregiving, so parents can stay home with sick kids without risking their family's economic security. And it would provide job security for workers who are too sick to come to work.

Passing the Healthy Families Act, or emergency legislation that reflects its core principles, would not only do right by American workers and families, and finally give them the freedom to care for themselves or a sick relative when they need to. It would save employers money, encourage productivity, and help boost the economy. And, most importantly right now, it would protect the public health by helping to stop the spread of dangerous viral infections like H1N1.

It would also give us one more chance to honor the life's work of a true champion of working people, Senator Kennedy. I wish he could have been here today to help make this case – He cared very deeply about this issue, and I know his passion and his eloquence would have steered us all to action. Now that he has left us, I very much hope we in Congress can honor his legacy once more, by finding the strength and the will to get this legislation passed for America's workers and families. They have already waited too long.

Thank you.