

Opening Statement
by
U.S. Senator Joni Ernst (R-Iowa)
Before the Senate Finance Committee Subcommittee on Social Security, Pensions, and Family Policy
July 11, 2018

Chairman Cassidy, Ranking Member Brown, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify before you today. I also want to thank my dear friend and colleague, Senator Gillibrand, for being an important voice in this discussion.

The issue of paid leave is incredibly important. Millions of mothers, fathers, grandparents, and families across the country struggle with the realities of childbirth and infant care while also working hard to put food on the table and raise strong and healthy families. It is long overdue that Congress not just have a conversation on these matters but get serious about a path forward.

As a mother myself, I know that being a parent is never an easy task. Additionally, throughout my career, I have worked with and heard from numerous working parents, including those on my own staff, who have struggled to navigate the challenges of balancing work with the need to provide safe and supportive care for their new babies. Some are fortunate enough to have paid benefits provided by their employers. However, many families in America do not have this luxury.

To illustrate just how difficult it is for working moms and dads, I want to share the story of a constituent named Jessica. Jessica is the epitome of what it means to be an Iowan. She's been working since she was sixteen and done everything from working at a call center, to waitressing, which is her current position.

Jessica is also married and she and her husband are the proud parents of two young boys. They work day in and day out to provide for their growing family. Along the way it hasn't been easy. Money, at times, has been tight and both Jessica and her husband had to decide between working and meeting rent and taking time to care for their newborn.

Common sense tells us that it's important for parents to spend time with their newborn. The bond that is formed when parents first lay eyes on their child only becomes stronger the longer they spend together.

A recent study by the *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy* found the amount of time that new parents spend around their newborn has a direct influence on the quality of mother-child interactions as well as childhood and adolescent outcomes.¹

Paid family leave policies have been shown to increase breastfeeding rates² and are associated with better infant health outcomes as well as decreased rates of low birth weight and infant mortality.³

¹ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40723-018-0041-6#Sec19>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26991788>

³ <http://www.mdpi.com/2227-9032/4/2/30/html>

When Jessica had her son Karter, she was only able to take two weeks off before returning to work. This is despite the fact that she had a C-section which made it difficult and painful for her to work in the first few weeks after delivery.

She would go to work in the morning but when her lunch break came she would go to the bathroom, pump milk, and then run home to give it to her husband. All within an hour. Her husband works nights so when Jessica returned home at the end of the day she only had a few precious hours to spend with Karter and her husband before he had to go to work. Jessica is expecting her third child and is due in December. She is unsure how much time she and her husband will be able to take off. Jessica's experience is a similar story in households around the country. As a nation, we can do better for our families.

President Trump highlighted paid leave during his State of the Union address and his Administration was the first to budget for a national paid leave program. Through the leadership of Ivanka Trump, the Administration has worked closely to develop a dialogue with Congress. I'm glad to see that members of the House and Senate and from both sides of the aisle are paying attention to this issue, recognizing that moms and dads across the country are trying to figure out how to ensure their babies are well-cared for and nurtured in those precious first few weeks of life.

By paying attention to these needs, we are also recognizing the important economic contribution of these families who give so much to our communities. Our policies should reflect the evolving needs of this workforce and reduce barriers that pose challenges to parents balancing families and work.

As a conservative, I want to craft paid leave policy that can not only attract consensus, but is viable for families, employers, and the economy, recognizing that working parents by definition are an essential part of many businesses. Few businesses can afford more taxes or more cuts to their bottom line. So we have to find a solution that doesn't make our economy worse off or decrease the jobs available to working parents.

I feel it is important to target a paid leave benefit to individuals who don't have access to these benefits such as the two-thirds of low-income families that don't have paid leave. These families are also more likely to work on an hourly basis where if they do not work, they do not get paid – they don't enjoy sick leave or vacation or other forms of leave that can help bridge the gap.

For the past few months, I have been working with Senators Marco Rubio and Mike Lee on the issue of paid leave. We have been exploring how new parents could elect to receive a paid leave benefit through Social Security. In return for receiving these benefits, participants would defer the collection of their Social Security benefits upon retirement. We are still working through the complexities but I am hopeful we can craft a policy that will benefit families who need paid leave the most.

Thank you again, Chairman Cassidy and Ranking Member Brown for holding this hearing today. I look forward to working with you on the important issue of paid leave.

Helping families is an issue we can all agree on and I hope that we can have a productive dialogue on how Congress can best help them.