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**PUBLIC JUSTICE**

# Honoring Families, Loving Our Neighbors: A Common Ground Proposal for Paid Family Leave

**FAMILIES VALUED 2021-2022 LEADERSHIP COUNCIL**

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# Executive Summary

Christian scripture and tradition honor family life, teaching that God created families for good. Jesus celebrated families and modeled concern for an ever-widening circle of people, calling his followers to love their neighbors, particularly those who are marginalized and vulnerable.

These teachings, together, call us to cultivate a common life in which all people are empowered to meet their family responsibilities. Yet, many new parents and family caregivers in the United States struggle to secure time to care for loved ones without financial strain or fear of job loss. The average American household, for example, experiences a drop in income during the months before and after a child is born, placing parents and children, especially those in low-income households, in a precarious position in one of the most demanding phases of family caretaking.

The lack of paid family leave in the United States is one of many ways our society falls short of hospitality to family life. We believe that paid family leave can and should be achieved in the United States. It should ensure universal minimum benefits, prioritize those who are vulnerable, support diverse cultural conceptions of kin, and promote administrative simplicity. Policymakers should move toward this vision by establishing a universal benefit for new parents and end-of-life caregivers, and by guaranteeing all workers at least two weeks of annual paid leave for health and caregiving needs.



# Honoring Families, Loving Our Neighbors

## Introduction

The pandemic placed phenomenal strain on families. It also revealed the true extent of the work families have long shouldered alone. Families have been making tough choices for so long that these trade-offs feel normal even as routine sacrifices wear down the foundations of family life. Many Americans raise the question that Christian author Gracy Olmstead does: “How is it that, in an incredibly wealthy country – one in which most Americans believe strongly that families matter, and ought to be protected and preserved – we seem to be selling families so short?”<sup>1</sup>

Americans are now reckoning with burnout and fatigue. Many desire a wider range of choices in how they knit together work and caregiving. Returning to pre-COVID arrangements will not be enough. Maternal health advocate Khadija Garrison Adams puts it this way: “We want to honor the whole of life, rather than live in a world of pieces.”

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Employers that treat workers’ caregiving responsibilities with rigidity or as disconnected from their presence at work could find themselves unable to recruit and retain workers.

So too, changes on the horizon in abortion law mean it is even more urgent to address the material needs of expectant and new parents. In surveys of women seeking an abortion, one of the most common reasons given by women for making that choice was that they did not believe they could afford to cover financial costs related to raising a child (73 percent).<sup>2</sup> It is crucial that expectant parents be assured of a world in which they will be supported in caring for a new child.

In 2021, the Center for Public Justice Families Valued Program convened a council of leaders from different Christian traditions and theological perspectives, walks and stages of life, and spheres of



expertise, to reflect together on what paid family leave could look like in the United States. This brief represents the group's collective work. During a season of political polarization and gridlock, we believe this proposal represents an achievable next step for our diverse political community, arrived at through mutual learning, dialogue, and the seeking of common ground.

## A Common Ground Proposal

The continued failure to guarantee paid family leave in the United States is one way our society falls short of providing sufficient support for caregivers and those in need of care. Public opinion polls show widespread support for paid family leave.<sup>3</sup> The idea has been championed by legislators from both major parties. But big questions remain about what paid leave looks like, who it is for, and what goals it should seek to achieve. We sought to answer these questions in ways that are practical; are attentive to the diverse experiences of families, workers, and employers; and are rooted in Christian teaching.

### Our Story and Values

As Christians, we look to Jesus as a guide for conducting our personal lives as well as for cultivating a just common life. Jesus' ministry was embodied, and he honored the embodiment of those he met and served. He attended to each person's story, recognizing the woman suffering from hemorrhages (Mark 5:25-34, Luke 8:43-48) and listening intently to the questions and history of the woman from Samaria (John 4:1-42). He sent his disciples into foreign territory to meet people in need (Luke 9:1-6). Jesus' manner of living demonstrated that each person is made in the image of God, possessing human dignity.

Jesus' first recorded miracle took place at a wedding, at the request of his mother and in service of a family celebration (John 2:1-11). Jesus' actions incarnated the commandment to "honor your mother and father" (Exodus 20:12). Jesus' ministry reminds us that God loves families and creates them for a purpose. Families attend to the vulnerable, nurture the image of God in each person, and instill virtues of service and solidarity.

Finally, Jesus sought out those who were excluded, isolated, or grieving, connecting them to relationships (John 19:25-29). Jesus challenged the centrality of blood relationship, naming those who follow the will of God as family members, too (Matthew 12:48-50). We, thus, recognize the value of family and kin relationships as they are expressed in different ways across cultures, communities, and life journeys.



*Jesus challenged the centrality of blood relationship, naming those who follow the will of God as family members, too (Matthew 12:48-50).*

Jesus used the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) to show that concrete acts of mercy are how we love our neighbor. Loving the neighbor was never a theory for Jesus, but a way of life, an ideal consistently carried out in word and deed. This ethic of care rests on grace and not reciprocity.

## A Common Life That Enables Care

At some point, all people will experience vulnerability and will be in need of care. Good laws can help cultivate a common life in which these inevitable seasons of dependency and vulnerability are not marked by neglect but by flourishing, and in which those responsible for the care of others are empowered to fulfill that duty.

Toward this end, we propose a paid leave policy organized around two core goals:

- Enable people with care responsibilities to honor those responsibilities without significant financial hardship or fear of job loss.
- Prepare workplaces to routinely accommodate workers' health and caregiving needs.

Specifically, we recommend a two-pronged approach, described in more detail in the next section. One element should be focused on new parents and end-of-life caregivers, and the other on medical and caregiving needs broadly speaking. These two elements provide a starting point for advancing our goals and a complement to other private and public policies.

**Establish a universal paid benefit for new parents and end-of-life caregivers.** The federal government should offer a significant cash benefit payable to new parents, enabling at least 12 weeks of dedicated caregiving. Similarly, a universal, time-limited benefit should be available for other distinct types of care responsibilities, such as end-of-life hospice care.

**Guarantee at least two weeks, annually, of paid medical and caregiving leave for all who work.** The federal government should establish a labor-force-wide minimum paid time off standard that reaches all workers and is flexible enough to handle a variety of personal medical needs and care for anyone considered kin.



## Government's Purpose

Many of our Christian traditions teach that governments have a duty to protect basic human rights such as rights to life and family. Governments also have a particular duty to protect those who are vulnerable, which, in some of our traditions, includes the unborn.

Several policy principles follow from our Christian vision of government, our values, and practical considerations. Specifically, we believe the following principles and approaches should shape paid leave policy.

- Set minimum universal benefits.
- Make it easy for people to receive benefits.
- Minimize friction and the cost of administering benefits.
- Attend particularly to those who are most vulnerable, marginalized, and at risk.
- Minimize burdens to employers, particularly smaller employers.
- Recognize broad and culturally appropriate conceptions of kin in treatment of caregiving responsibilities.

In Catholic social thought, the principle of subsidiarity suggests caution about top-down government policies, but it also recognizes that there is an important place for government action, namely where smaller groups, such as families and businesses, cannot meet a given need.

The Reformed tradition's principle of sphere sovereignty suggests that the government should ensure that family life is not crowded out by market forces. It can, for example, set norms for the entire labor force such that parents and other caregivers neither face discrimination at work nor are forced to choose between their careers and their families, or between economic security and family responsibility.

Reliance on private employers to enable family caregiving without policy intervention has yielded results that are deeply inequitable and insufficient to meet all families' needs. Formal, employer-based paid family leave policies reach only 23 percent of the workforce. Workers in the highest-earning jobs are two to three times as likely to have access to either paid parental or paid family leave as those in the lowest-earning jobs.<sup>4</sup>

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Basic benefits such as paid sick leave and vacation time remain stubbornly unavailable to more than 20 percent of the workforce, including many workers of color and those in human service and public-facing jobs.<sup>5</sup> One third of Black workers, and half of Latino workers, for example, do not regularly receive any paid sick days at work.<sup>6</sup> Even when basic benefits such as sick leave are available, not all workers are assured that leave can be used for their most pressing needs. Lower-income workers in particular, are more likely than others to not take leave because their request for it is initially denied or they fear negative consequences at work.<sup>7</sup>

Our principles and survey of current benefits also lead us to the conviction that the cost of paid leave initiatives should be widely shared. Government funding, enabled through taxation, ensures that the cost will not be borne only by those families most in need or by small businesses already struggling to finance employee benefits.

## Proposal Detail: Foundational Elements of Paid Family Leave

### **Establish a universal paid benefit for new parents and end-of-life caregivers.**

We believe that paid leave should reach all families while attending particularly to those who are the most vulnerable. The first element of our two-pronged proposal, therefore, is to enact a universal paid benefit for new parents and end-of-life caregivers. The federal government should offer a significant cash benefit payable to new parents on the birth or adoption of a child. The goal of this benefit would be to allow each parent to take no less than 12 weeks of leave following the birth or adoption of a child without having significant financial concerns. Similarly, a caregiver benefit should be available to those providing a loved one with end-of-life care.<sup>8</sup> A “compassionate care” benefit, as it is named in some countries, protects people from incurring heavy financial burdens alongside the personal and emotional strains of providing end of life care.

Consistent with the principle of attending to the most vulnerable, we recommend that the standard benefit amount should be offered at a flat rate tied to a regional standard, such as full-time minimum wage or a percentage of median wage for a given locale.

The program should be offered as a direct cash benefit, not a tax credit, to make participation as simple as possible. A benefit for new parents could be administered, for example, directly by the Social Security Administration, whether upon a parent’s application for a child’s Social Security number or upon separate application (with attestation by a healthcare provider). Likewise, a benefit for end-of-life care could be provided to an individual designated as primary caregiver upon provision to the Social Security Administration of a copy of a hospice patient’s care plan.<sup>9</sup>





States and employers would be free to add to this benefit. Benefits could be paid concurrently with Family-Medical-Leave Act-protected leave from work.

Over one third of children in the United States are born into low-income families, and 16 percent are born to families living at or below the poverty line.<sup>10</sup> Breadwinners in this income group are the least likely of all workers to receive paid leave at work.<sup>11</sup> New and expectant parents may have to give up pay, or even risk job loss, in order to manage prenatal visits, pregnancy-protective rest, and infant care. Consequently, many families see a drop in household income before and after childbirth.<sup>12</sup> Other parents try to remain at work while compromising care. Still other households have stay-at-home parents focused on caregiving in the home or parents who are full-time students. A flat-rate, direct cash benefit would alleviate the financial strain associated with caregiving for all of these families, especially the most vulnerable families.

### **Guarantee at least two weeks annual paid medical and caregiving leave.**

Caregiving takes many forms: accompanying a member of one's church or a stepparent to medical appointments; caring, as a young adult, for elderly parents; helping a loved one secure mental health care; and attending educator meetings for a child with special needs, are just a few. Thus, there is a need for policy to accommodate broad and culturally appropriate conceptions of kin with respect to caregiving relationships.

The second component of our proposal, therefore, is to guarantee at least two weeks of annual leave for medical or caregiving purposes. Leave should be flexible enough to meet various health and family needs (for instance, preventative care, medical treatment, bereavement) and to accommodate broad cultural definitions of family and kin. As is the case for paid time off programs utilized by employers (sometimes referred to as "PTO"), there should be low documentation standards. Employees should simply sign an affidavit that they will use the leave for personal medical leave or to care for someone they consider kin.



# Conclusion

As a microcosm of Christian citizens who seek to be guided by Jesus' commission to love our neighbors, we are inspired by the way in which his ministry of grace and mercy traced, and is tracing, an ever-expanding circle of care and inclusion. When we celebrate the blessing of family, we recognize that God intends families to nurture and protect their members as well as to cultivate solidarity with one's wider community. Theologian Julie Hanlon Rubio observes, for example, that Catholic teaching on the family refuses to "limit families by telling them to simply focus on themselves."<sup>13</sup> In the spirit of solidarity, we recognize the interconnectedness of our own lives and families with others.' Just as each one of us experiences seasons of vulnerability, so do our neighbors. Just as each one of us has a need for family and community, so do our neighbors.

*"The genius of Catholic teaching on the family is its refusal to limit families by telling them to simply focus on themselves. Christian families... are to grow in self-giving love within and outside the bonds of kinship."*

*~ Julie Hanlon Rubio*

As citizens, we commit to work together to attend to our neighbors' needs in concrete ways, including by promoting a culture of care and in empowering those who are responsible for others to fulfill those responsibilities. Paid family leave as described in this brief. Establishing universal new parent benefits and paid medical and caregiving leave honors family, kin and the work of care.

## A Liturgy for Caregivers and Those Who Love Them

We ask: Who then is our neighbor?

Our neighbor is the father who needs to care for a newly adopted child...

Our neighbor is the mother going back to work one week after giving birth...

Our neighbor is the stepdaughter whose stepmother is recovering from a stroke...

Our neighbor is the co-worker who needs time each day to nurse her newborn...

Our neighbor is the restaurant worker who comes to work sick because he cannot afford to stay home...

Our neighbor is the pastor going through cancer treatment...

Our neighbor is the small business owner who wants to provide for her employees but worries about financial and administrative costs...

Our neighbor is the parent who cannot keep her job through the winter cold and flu season...

Lord, open our eyes to the needs of our neighbors so that we may be the hands and feet of Christ.



## FAMILIES VALUED 2021-2022 LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

### Proposal Endorsers

Khadija Garrison Adams

Co-founder of Black Lactation Circle (BLaC) of Ohio, Leader and Chief Facilitator, On Neutral Ground

Dr. Denise Daniels

Hudson T. Harrison Professor of Entrepreneurship, Wheaton College

Kristen Day

Executive Director, Democrats for Life of America

Judy Wu Dominick

Writer, Musician

Dr. Steve McMullen

Associate Professor of Economics, Hope College

Jena Lee Nardella

Partner, PRAXIS

Grace Olmstead

Journalist

Dr. Julie Hanlon Rubio

Professor of Christian Social Ethics, Jesuit School of Theology

Leah Libresco Sargeant

Writer

Kaitlyn Schiess

PhD student, Duke University

Rev. Amy Zietlow

Pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Writer

### Proposal Advisor/Contributor

Rev. Sekinah Hamlin

Justice and Witness Minister, United Church of Christ

\* Institutions named for identification purposes only



Families Valued Program Leadership

Rachel Anderson

Resident Fellow, Center for Public Justice; Founder, Families Valued

Tirzah Montanye

Research Associate, Center for Public Justice



# Endnotes

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9. Federal regulations governing Medicare reimbursement of hospice care specifies a process for establishing a hospice care plan. Such a plan typically includes a designated caregiver. See 42 CFR Section 418.56.
10. Households deemed low-income are those earning at 200 percent of the poverty line, approximately \$50,000 or less in annual earnings. U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey*, 2017.
11. Only nine percent of the lowest-wage workers have access to a formal parental or family leave program; fewer than 40 percent report being able to take any type of paid leave for family care (putting together paid sick days, vacation, leave donated by co-workers). Sawhill, Isabel V., Sarah Nzau, Katherine Guyot, "A primer on access to and use of paid family leave," *Brookings Institute*, December 2019 (Citing the *American Time Use Study*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employee Benefits in the United States," March 2019, Table 31).
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## About the Center for Public Justice

The Center for Public Justice is an independent, nonpartisan organization devoted to policy research and civic education. Working outside the familiar categories of right and left, conservative and liberal, we seek to help citizens and public officeholders respond to God's call to do justice. Our mission is to equip citizens, develop leaders, and shape policy in pursuit of our purpose to serve God, advance justice, and transform public life.

### Families Valued

Families Valued is a program of the Center for Public Justice that advances workplace and public policies that honor God's call to both work and family life.

## Contact

P.O. Box 48368 Washington, DC 20002-0368

202-695-2667

[www.cpjustice.org](http://www.cpjustice.org)

