[INSERT DATE HERE]

Your Name

Your Address

Your Representative

Your Representative’s Address

Dear Representative [INSERT LAST NAME]:

I am writing you to ask that you help families by working to increase both the amount of maternity leave allotted and to provide paid leave to new mothers in [INSERT STATE HERE]. I understand that the Family and Medical Leave Act allows employees up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave, although only six weeks of short term disability may be given. Therefore, for many families, six weeks can be the only amount of time they can afford to take off with their newborn babies. With many families relying on two incomes to survive, a program (in this case, the FMLA) that does not provide for any compensation is one that becomes non-viable for many of the people it is designed to help. As few states have any policies in place to improve upon the FMLA, it remains the centerpiece of US maternity leave policy.

Compare this to the more than 100 countries that allow *a minimum* of 12 weeks of *paid* parental leave. For example, Canada allows 50 weeks of parental leave at a salary of 55% up to maximum and an extra two weeks unpaid leave. In Europe most countries allow 14 weeks of paid leave. France allows 16 weeks fully paid with 2 years unpaid and your job guaranteed. Germany allows 14 weeks fully paid or 12 months at 67% and up to 3 years unpaid. Norway allows 56 weeks paid at 80% or 46 weeks at 100% paid. In this realm, the United States is far behind other developing nations with similar economies. It’s about time we realized what other countries already know–the importance of maternity leave on not only a strong family, but a strong nation.

What does a longer parental leave offer families? To begin, it would afford more mothers the time needed to develop a breastfeeding relationship with their child. The effects of suboptimal breastfeeding rates in the United States have been well-documented, with a 2009 review by Drs. Bartick and Reinhold in the journal Pediatrics suggesting that if the US could get 80% of mothers to follow the World Health Organization’s guidelines of exclusively breastfeeding for six months, the government would save $10.5 *billion* *per year* in health care costs while also saving 741 lives, the vast majority of whom would be under the age of one. It has been well-documented that the early return to work that is common in the United States has a direct effect on the length of time that women breastfeed, with earlier returns to work resulting in earlier weaning times (e.g., Biagioli, 2003; Duckett, 1992; Ogbuanu, Glover, Probst, Liu, & Hussey, 2011).

A second benefit is that it can reduce the rates of post-partum depression (PPD) and other psychological disorders plaguing many mothers. While PPD was long-considered solely an effect of hormones released post-birth, our understanding of the disorder has changed and we’ve realized that it is highly influenced by environmental factors. Support and sleep being two of the biggest (e.g., Dennis & Ross, 2005; Dørheim, Bondevik, Eberhard-Gran, & Bjorvatn, 2009). For mothers who have to return to work after six weeks, or even twelve, they suddenly find themselves working all day then returning to an infant they have to bond with and care for, meaning they get very little sleep and are often overworked with little instrumental support, increasing the likelihood of suffering PPD. Not to mention that the bonding process has been prematurely interrupted making it harder for both mother and infant to adjust to each other.

A third benefit pertains to the development of a secure attachment between infant and mother. Infants with a secure attachment to their caregivers are not only more sociable and cry less (e.g., Bell & Ainsworth, 1972; van den Boom, 1994), but perhaps most importantly, are far less likely to be abused (for a review, see Morton & Browne, 1998). In 2010 3.6 million children suffered abuse in the United States, with the highest rates being for infants. More than 80% of the time, the perpetrators were the child’s parents. Child abuse and neglect is a great concern and while there are already funds allocated towards prevention of neglect and abuse I believe—and research supports—that increasing the amount of maternity leave can reduce abuse and neglect rates. In one study, there was a linear relationship between the length of maternity leave and the quality of the attachment between the mother and child (including positive affect and positive behaviours) (Clark, Hyde, Essex, & Klein, 1997). Breastfeeding, which I have already covered as being important to infant health, has also been found to increase bonding between mother and child (Else-Quest, Hyde, & Clark, 2003), and serves as an independent protective factor in abuse (Strathern, Mamun, Najman, & O’Callaghan, 2009). I believe that allowing for a strong attachment relationship to form will create a successful child who will become an important contributor to society.

A fourth benefit is increased gender equality in the work place. Providing a protected period of time for which women can recuperate from birth and form the necessary bonds with her child increases the chances that she will not only return to work, but return less stressed and more focused (Burgess, Gregg, Propper, & Washbrook, 2008). It also reduces the chance that she will suffer long-term pay differentials with her male and childless female counterparts (Waldfogel, 1998a, 1998b). While the gender gap in pay inequality has been steadily decreasing, an opposite trend has emerged for women with children who are facing larger pay gaps between themselves and childless female workers. Finding ways to reduce this gap is essential for the well-being of families in the United States.

Because of these factors, I strongly believe employers of 50 employees or more should be required to give a minimum maternity leave of 12 weeks paid and up to 12 months unpaid with job guaranteed while employers with less than 50 employees should be required to give the current standard for the FMLA. Our babies are the biggest sufferers from current maternity leave standards and for a country that speaks of “family values” we are failing to live up to that ideal. Our children are the future of the nation and we need to give them the best start at life, we need to give them what they deserve. Increasing the time allowed for maternity leave would help to improve breastfeeding rates, reduce post-partum depression, reduce child neglect and abuse by improving parent – child attachment, and improve working mothers’ standing in the work force while increasing the chances that they return and feel invested in returning to work.

Thank you for your consideration. Please contact me if you have any further questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

[INSERT YOUR NAME HERE]

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