
Guest Commentary

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BY REP. SCOTT CAMPBELL

The Vermont House of Representatives did important work last week. We passed 17 bills that now go on to the Senate, and advanced eight more. All but three of the 25 bills passed on unanimous or near-unanimous votes.

Those three were contentious: H.230 Suicide Prevention, adds some restrictions on guns; H.126 Community Resilience and Biodiversity, sets goals for protecting biodiversity and habitat; and H.66 Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance, establishes a universal paid leave program.

I supported all three. To summarize the first two briefly, H.230 is intended to reduce suicides by firearms, currently epidemic in Vermont. It implements a 72-hour waiting period and standards of safe storage, and enhances existing extreme risk protection standards. H.126 sets goals of conserving 30% of Vermont's land by 2030 (currently about 27%), and 50% by 2050. "Conserved" does not mean unused, but it does intend to protect the natural environment and flora and fauna, as Vermont, and the world, experience extreme wildlife population declines due to habitat loss, pollution and climate change.

The last bill, H.66 Paid Family and Medical Leave Insurance would establish a universal in-

surance system. Administered by the Vermont Treasurer's office, it would pay employees 90% of their weekly wage up to the the State average weekly wage, for up to 12 weeks per year. The cost initially will be 0.55 percent of the employee's wage, or 55 cents per \$100, adjusted annually for sustainability with a ceiling of 1.00 percent of wages. The cost is split 50/50 employer/employee, though the employer can voluntarily pay a higher share. Employers offering the same or better benefit on their own would be exempt from participating.

Why is this important?

The COVID pandemic revealed many weaknesses in our economy, and one of the starkest was the inability for most workers to take time off work with pay to care for loved ones or ourselves. Fortunately Federal emergency funding for Unemployment Insurance, the Paycheck Protection Program and other programs blunted the impact for most of us. Those programs have ended, but the need they addressed has not.

Who benefits?

Everyone with a job benefits, but especially those with jobs that pay at or below the State average weekly wage — in other words, lower-wage, typically service sector employees whom we recently referred to as essential workers. Also helped are small employers

who see the value of such a benefit but could not afford to provide it on their own.

Will employees abuse the system?

This is not paid sick leave, which unfortunately some people do abuse. It is more like short-term disability insurance, where reasons for leave requests must be documented. Rhode Island has had a similar system for decades. Utilization rates there are in the range of 2% of all workers.

Why oppose the idea?

Opponents cite the total amount of money that would be collected — in excess of \$100 million per year — as the cost of the program. But most of that money would be returned to employees, and the local economy, as benefits. Ongoing administration costs are estimated by the Joint Fiscal Office at about \$13 million the first full year of benefits in 2027.

Data circulated by one opponent showed that 14 other states have some sort of paid leave program. Of these, 12 are universal ("mandatory") and two are voluntary. The two voluntary programs are administered by private insurance companies; 11 of the universal programs are state-run.

Governor Phil Scott has proposed an employer-based voluntary system run by private insurance. In my view this is wholly inadequate to the need. It also

recalls the painful history of our medical insurance system. After World War II, many countries adopted universal health care systems with guaranteed insurance coverage. The U.S. elected to establish a system of voluntary, employer-based, privately run health insurance, leading to the most expensive and inequitable system in the world — and the cause of two-thirds of personal bankruptcies. It serves no one well except the insurance companies, yet we cannot get rid of it. Why would we set up another program on that example?

In my view, universal paid leave insurance is not only the right thing to do, it is a critical workforce and economic development strategy. Right now Vermont is competing with other states to attract and retain working families, and a dozen of those states offer universal paid leave.

I am disappointed with the Governor's opposition to the universal plan. If we really want strong families and children, we wouldn't leave it up to them to ask the Internet for help. I hope the Senate will pass H.66, and we can join other mature economies in offering this vital support.

Rep. Scott Campbell, D-Caledonia-Essex, lives in St. Johnsbury. His House district includes the towns of Concord, Kirby and St. Johnsbury.