
Testimony

New Jersey Senate Labor Committee

May 10, 2018



**S2528 (family leave amendments), S1838 (FLI/TDI changes),
S342 (FLI/TDI data collection)**

To: The Honorable Fred H. Madden, Chair
Members, Senate Labor Committee

From: Cecilia Zalkind, President and CEO
Peter Chen, Policy Counsel
Advocates for Children of New Jersey

Date: May 10, 2018

RE: S2528 (family leave amendments), S1838 (FLI/TDI changes), S342 (FLI/TDI data collection)

Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) appreciate the opportunity to provide the following comments in support of S2528, which would expand and improve New Jersey's family leave insurance (FLI) program and benefits; S1838, which allows for early application for family leave and temporarily disability leave and S342, which requires the Department of Labor to collect more data on who uses these programs.

Young children develop best when they spend enough time with their parents to build strong bonds. Research on brain development shows how critical the first months are to establishing the strong attachments that create healthy development. Yet many families are often in the difficult position of working to put food on the table or staying home to bond with their new child. In 2016, 68 percent of New Jersey children under age 1 had mothers who were in the labor force.

New Jersey currently has one of the nation's best paid family leave laws, but improvements are needed to ensure that more families can access these services. For example, roughly 68,000 children under age 1 had all parents in the labor force, but there were only 27,000 family leave claims for bonding with a child (including both mothers and fathers). That means fewer than half of babies with working parents received family leave benefits.

There also continues to be inefficiency in applying for family leave after the completion of temporary disability caused by pregnancy and childbirth. There were roughly 24,000 claims for temporary disability due to pregnancy and childbirth, but only 14,500 claims for family leave immediately following TDI. This means that of mothers who give birth and take disability time, only about half end up taking family leave time as well. S1838 will help streamline this process by allowing parents to submit claims before the leave begins, rather than waiting until a child is born to submit a claim and determine eligibility.

US Department of Labor research on New Jersey's family leave program showed continued barriers to usage including:

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- Low awareness of the program,
- Wage replacement that is too low for many families to sustain,
- Lack of job protection,
- Lack of flexibility, and
- Red tape and difficulty applying for the program.

These bills take a step in the right direction. Higher wage replacement levels will allow more families to take advantage of the system, so they won't have to choose between working for a full wage and bonding with their child. Collecting more data about these programs will help us understand who is using the program and who is not.

A robust family leave system is an essential part of a coordinated system to support infants and toddlers and their families, including high-quality affordable child care, access to appropriate health care services for babies and parents, and supports to ease the financial burden for families of young children.

We know that all areas of development have a foundation in a strong secure relationship between children and their parents and caregivers. An expanded family leave bill helps give families a real decision to create the environment best for their children.