

George Blekas

Testimony by George Blekas Resident of Manorville, New York

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor

Workforce Protection Subcommittee Field Hearing on

Family-Friendly Leave Policies; Improving how Workers Balance Work and Family

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Good morning ladies, gentlemen and distinguished guests. My name is George Blekas and my purpose for being here today is to tell my experience with FMLA and the financial impact of dealing with a catastrophic illness.

I would like to give you a little of my background. I graduated Plainview-Old Bethpage high school in 1979, went to college at SUNY, Fredonia and the University of Texas in Austin, Texas. After moving back to New York in 1989 I landed a job with New York Telephone.

Ironically one month after being hired by New York Telephone I wound up walking the picket line to keep my medical coverage. I must admit at the time it was not as obvious to me, as it is today, how important that fight was.

By 2000 New York Telephone had undergone a bunch of name changes and one big change this brought was a cut to the customary over time that I had gotten to used to having. Living on Long Island is an expensive proposition so not being lazy, and being good with electronics, I started up a boutique guitar electronics company on World Wide Web. This was the perfect second income for me as I could do this when ever I had the time and it did not interfere with the family, work or baseball.

My story revolves around my wife and children so I would like to touch on them for a moment. I have known my wife, Maria since we were 4 years old. We went all the way through school and graduated High School together. We went our separate

ways during the college years but got together after I got back from Texas in 1989. We started dating on the 4th of July, we got engaged on the 4th of July and we got married on the 4th of July, which is kind of ironic when you think about tying the knot on Independence Day. It does make it impossible to forget your wedding anniversary which tends to keep me out of the dog house. Today we have two boys. Nicholas who is 14 years old and Brian who is 11 years old. Both are very active in travel baseball. Once Brian was old enough to go to school Maria got a job as a teacher's aide in the Eastport South Manor School district. This was our third income and the job was perfect because Maria's schedule was identical to the boy's schedule.

One day while at a baseball game Maria jumped up to cheer and felt something in her left breast. Ironically this was September 11th, 2007 that we felt a lump that appeared to engulf her entire breast. By September 21st we had the news that this was an 8cm stage 3 Breast Cancer. Needless to say everything changed for us that day. We had to spend many days visiting various doctors for all sorts of tests. Initially, I took vacation time to cover the many doctor visits but soon ran out of time. I was informed by my boss, Tom Schultz, and Rick Nemcheck, of CWA Local 1108, of something called FMLA. FMLA would allow me to keep my job while allowing me up to 12 weeks off, without pay, to tend to the medical needs of a family member.

With my job secure I was able to concentrate on cancer and its various treatments and side effects. I was reading everything I could find on the subject. Maria had to leave work as she now had 10 weeks of Chemotherapy, a mastectomy and radiation to deal with so working was not an option for her.

At this point I was a dad, mom, nurse and part time Verizon employee. I no longer had the time, nor energy to do my electronics business. In effect I lost my second income, my wife's income and Verizon income because FMLA does not pay for the time missed tending to a sick family member.

With the bills coming in, savings depleted and income down to a trickle one has to scramble to keep from losing the farm. I sold off a car and cashed in a 401k, that Maria had prior to getting married, in order to keep up and was wondering what I will do next. Another mortgage perhaps? Take from my 401k? Sell a kidney?

Today we are literally living from pay check to pay check so I urge Congress to pass the Paid Family Leave Legislation. I also want to ask the New York State

Legislature to pass Paid Family Leave at the state level this month by the end of the session on June 23rd, in order to alleviate the grim reality of living pay check to pay check.

I thank you for your time. Have a nice day.

George Blekas