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Jeremy Kridel
8353 Montgomery Run Rd
Apt A
Ellicott City, MD 21043-7445
macharjeremy@gmail.com / (301) 708-9675

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB539

Labor and Employment - Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program - Establishment

TO: Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman, and the members of the Finance Committee

FROM: Rabbi Jeremy Kridel

My name is Rabbi Jeremy Kridel. I live in Ellicott City, Maryland, in District 12. This testimony is in support of the paid family leave legislation SB539.

My wife and I are the parents of a teenager with a diagnosis of severe autism. As the parent of a disabled child who, as a rabbi, counsels others who have disabled family members, I bring a unique lens to the question of paid family and medical leave.

In 2019, my son spent a total of 64 days hospitalized, all from late August onward. Four weeks — 28 of those 64 days — were spent in emergency rooms waiting for an inpatient placement at a specialized psychiatric unit at Sheppard Pratt's campus in Towson. During that waiting period — including 3 ½ weeks in the emergency department of the Baltimore Washington Medical Center, which spanned late November to mid-December and included the entire Thanksgiving holiday — we lived with our son in the emergency room. Because he was in an emergency department, we had to stay with him; because he could not be admitted inpatient, he was waylaid in the emergency department; because of his behavioral and psychiatric difficulties, which include aggressive behavior, we both needed to stay with him for his and others' safety. We were able to do this only because my wife and I both work for synagogues with supportive congregants, boards, and coworkers. We both work part-time for small religious organizations — a necessary compromise to help ensure that we can support our son's school in the event of an incident, and thus we lack even unpaid family leave under the federal FMLA. Without the understanding of our respective communities, we would have had to decide who was going to lose their job to stay with our son. We would certainly have lost our home in that situation, a particularly destabilizing experience for a child with autism.

No Marylander should face the choice of remaining employed or caring for an ill or disabled family member — and they certainly should not have to choose employment or family for acute, short-duration illnesses. And no Marylander who is paid on an hourly basis should be forced to choose between earning a wage or caring for a family member and going unpaid because they could not go to a job that pays only when hours are logged.

These insights are not new. Jewish biblical tradition makes it clear that workers should be treated fairly: “you shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer” (Deut. 24:14). Jewish legal tradition knows that workers need to be enabled to care for themselves and their employers by not working night and day, wearing themselves down until they are unproductive (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 16a).

It is time for our state to help hard-working Marylanders and their families have the stability and care they need to thrive. It is time to make paid family leave the law in Maryland.

In light of the needs of Maryland’s families and the values we share, **I respectfully urge that this committee submit a favorable report on SB539.**