

Telling a Story About Families and Opportunity: Increasing Support for Paid Family and Medical Leave Policies among Key Audiences

March 2020

This memo lays out a foundation for communicating about the importance of paid family and medical leave policies for all types and shapes of families. It is based on both qualitative and quantitative research completed in 2019 and builds on a range of additional communications best practices garnered from both research and the experience of communications experts and family support advocates from across the country. It is our hope that the guidance and research presented here help to bolster an already robust field of advocates and activists working on behalf of paid family and medical leave policies so that they might tell a unified story about leave that conveys the urgency of passing federal paid leave legislation that supports all families.

The Power of Narrative

A narrative is a Big Story, rooted in shared values and themes, that influences how people process information and make decisions. Overarching organizing stories help us make sense of the social and political world. Through narratives, seemingly unconnected events are organized into a whole and given meaning. Repetition and time are key to the narrative process.

Narratives play an important role in not only shaping our understanding of the world but also establishing and affirming our relationship to one another, institutions, and society. As such, narratives often reflect particular sets of cultural values that, in turn, establish social norms, systems, and structures. While many narratives can play an important social function, dominant narratives often reflect the interests and values of those in positions of power.

To shift, counter, and replace dominant narratives, it's crucial that movement organizers work together to identify common messaging elements for amplifying. In this way, we can begin to undermine harmful narratives and replace them with stories that promote opportunity and equity, among other important values.

It's also crucial that narratives and related messaging are rooted in research. In this case, we collaborated with Lake Research Partners, who conducted six focus groups in May 2019 and a national online survey in October 2019. Research methodology can be found at the end of this memo.

Building a Narrative

Experience and research suggest that successful narratives share a few common elements. They should:

- ▶ Lead with shared values
- ▶ Describe problems, but also point audiences toward clear solutions
- ▶ Be informed by public opinion research, media analysis, communications practice, and collective experience
- ▶ Adapt to key audiences, spokespeople, sub-issues, and circumstances
- ▶ Support a coherent “drumbeat” of stories, messages, and events—both short and long term

Elements of a Paid Family and Medical Leave Narrative

Vision: A country that values families of all types and puts in place the support programs they need to survive and thrive. This means, for instance, making sure everyone can be with their loved ones in times of family need and still earn an income—no exceptions. A country where everyone, no matter what they look like or where they come from, can contribute to our economy and society and still be there for their families and attend to their own health and wellness.

Heroes: Families of all kinds who shouldn’t have to risk their financial stability to be there for each other. Innovative programs like paid family and medical leave policies that support this. It’s important to center families in this discussion, and individual stories can be a powerful way to put a human face on the issue. We should do this by always connecting individual stories to the broader systemic solution to paint a picture of exactly how paid family and medical leave would change that particular story and our shared story.

If we spend too much time focused on individuals, there is a danger that audiences either only relate to that individual problem or imagine the solutions to it (“Doesn’t she have a neighbor who can help?”) or judge the individual circumstance (“He should have a better job.”). By showing that this issue affects many people and by consistently drawing a line to the systemic solution, which is a central hero to the story, we can make sure that we keep audience’s focus on our shared responsibility to make this happen.

Villains: Certain lawmakers and corporate lobbyists who say they support paid leave but promote plans that exclude the vast majority of caregivers and often guarantee neither pay nor leave while weakening key safety net programs families need. Their proposals force those who would be eligible to choose between their present needs and the future economic stability of their families.

Note that for long-term narrative purposes, it is not necessarily helpful to indicate that people are immutable or naturally “bad.” It’s also true that, although drawing clear lines between what we are proposing vs. the opposition’s plans and motivations is crucial, many persuadable audiences see too much of this as partisan bickering. It’s a careful balance in ensuring that we

have drawn distinctions while also giving persuadables a “side” that they’re interested in taking instead of dismissing all arguments as just politics.

Implication/Moral: When families of all kinds have the support they need through a range of programs like paid family and medical leave, they have the opportunity to thrive, which improves the overall health and sustainability of our economy and society. Denying people leave puts families at risk and forces people to choose between being there for their families and providing for their families.

Values: Family, opportunity, financial security, equity, fairness

Familiar Themes/Metaphors: Health metaphors, linking physical health to economic health. Lack of paid family and medical leave is “breaking families’ backs and banks.”

Building a Message

To introduce people to a new way of thinking about an issue like paid family and medical leave, it’s important to carefully consider the structure of our messages—particularly how they begin. People think in shortcuts and once we’ve activated a familiar shortcut, they are likely to process all future information through the lens of that shortcut. If we start with vision and values and fit the importance of the programs we want into that framework, many audiences will find themselves more open to the rest of our points. To this end, we suggest you build messages using the following structure:

Values, Problem, Solution, Action

Values. Starting with shared values helps audiences to “hear” our messages more effectively than using dry facts or emotional rhetoric.

- ▶ *One of the values we hold dear is being there for our families. Family comes first.*
- ▶ *When a family member is sick or a loved one needs help, we will do whatever is needed to ensure they get the care they need.*
- ▶ *Everyone should enjoy full and equal opportunity.*
- ▶ *The key to full and fair opportunity is the ability to work while maintaining a safe and healthy life for one’s children and family.*
- ▶ *No matter what we look like, where we come from, or what kind of families we live in, most of us agree that we are all trying to provide for our families.*
- ▶ *Time is a precious resource.¹*

¹Lake Research Partners Paid Family and Medical Leave: Findings based on Focus Groups and a National Survey. November 2019



Problem. Frame problems as a threat to our vision and values. Underscore our connections to one another and why this problem matters to everyone.

Not only do people face barriers to accessing health care, many of those who have access can't afford to take unpaid time from work to have the space to take care of themselves and their families.

Right now, people are paying the cost through lost wages or even lost jobs because we don't have a national paid family and medical leave program.

Working people and families in the United States lose nearly \$22.5 billion annually in lost wages because they can't access paid family and medical leave.

Lower-income people are less likely than higher-income people to have paid family and medical leave. Just 4% of lower-wage workers have access to paid family leave, compared to 31% of the highest wage workers. The majority of us don't have even \$1,000 to cover a medical emergency.

Employers are not required to provide even unpaid leave to care for an unmarried same-sex partner.

Problem Themes

- ▶ *No one should keep you from a spouse battling cancer, a parent nearing their final days, or a new baby needing attention.*
- ▶ *Too many Americans can't make ends meet or can't miss a paycheck.*
- ▶ *Those with the fewest resources are the hardest hit and can't get the benefits they need.*
- ▶ *For most Americans, taking time from work is something they simply can't afford.*
- ▶ *People are forced to choose between caring for sick family members and earning the salary needed to support their families.*
- ▶ *You should not have to risk losing your job or paycheck because you are providing care.*
- ▶ *Taking care of the people you love shouldn't force you to choose between working to support your family and losing pay and benefits.*
- ▶ *No one should have to choose between a paycheck and being there for their family.²*
- ▶ *No one should have to choose between their life and their livelihood.*

Solution. In our efforts to point out problems, we often spend less time promoting solutions. This can result in crisis fatigue among key audiences. Positive solutions leave people with choices, ideas, and motivation.

What is the commonsense approach to the problem you have outlined? Find ways to frame the solution as both the most common sense and the most in line with our values.

² Ibid.

Assign responsibility—Who can enact this solution? It’s particularly important to outline government’s role in this solution: to administer and enforce the solution but not pay directly for it.

- ▶ *We need to share those costs, so we can all thrive.*
- ▶ *We need a law that guarantees all workers can be with their loved ones AND earn a living—no exceptions; no matter where we work; and regardless of whether we are white, black, or brown.*
- ▶ *We are strongest when we all have a fair chance to achieve our full potential, contributing fully to our economy and society.*
- ▶ *Families need updated workplace standards to help meet their responsibilities.*
- ▶ *We must join together with people from all walks of life to fight for our future, in the same way we won better wages.*
- ▶ *We can create a program that works for all of us, no matter where we work, not just for the lucky few.*
- ▶ *We can promote health equity and reduce struggles for families by improving the health and well-being of all Americans.³*

Descriptions of the Solution

The federal policy we’re organizing for is known as the FAMILY Act. Sponsored by Rep. Rosa DeLauro and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, it would pool small contributions from employers and employees to provide up to 12 weeks of partially paid leave to bond with a new child, deal with a serious personal or family illness, or handle needs that arise from a military deployment. The length of leave pales in comparison to what’s offered by many companies and virtually all industrialized countries. Although basic, it is also bold and transformative, the first new social insurance program in the United States since the New Deal.

Enacting paid family and medical leave in the United States will begin to value caregiving and reverse centuries of inequity based on forced and devalued care provided by women and people of color. Paid leave will make it possible for people—regardless of gender—to cherish the first months of a child’s life and enrich the last months of a beloved parent’s life; to heal and thrive from their own injury or illness; and to spur the recovery or ease the suffering of a loved one. No more having to abandon a preemie in the NICU; no more chemo on your lunch break; no more teenagers quitting school to take a job at McDonald’s because a parent got fired for having leukemia. Meaningful paid leave in the United States will be a vital part of eradicating poverty and boosting family stability. And it will make businesses more robust by reducing turnover and increasing consumer solvency.⁴

³ Ibid.

⁴ Family Values @ Work. Paid Leave: Bold, Urgent and Within Our Reach, May 10, 2019.

<https://medium.com/@FmlyValuesWork/paid-leave-bold-urgent-and-within-our-reach-339518fb99>

Paid leave plans have been in operation in four states and passed in five more. They guarantee workers paid time for the full range of care purposes. Each one builds on the ones before—mostly with bipartisan support—to create inclusive, effective programs. They have adequate and progressive wage replacement so that those who earn the least get most or all of their wages during leave. They ensure those workers are able to return to their same or a similar job after their leave. And they have an inclusive definition of family.⁵

Action. While the solution points out the overarching policy or program ask, the action is an audience-specific way to spur action. In this case, point people toward the decisionmakers who need to act to pass the FAMILY Act, as well as those who influence them.

Highest Rated VPSA Messages from Online Survey

No matter what we look like, where we come from, or what kind of families we live in, most of us believe that we are all trying to provide for our families. But today, certain politicians and their lobbyists hurt everyone by failing to pass a national paid family and medical leave program. We need to join together with people from all walks of life to fight for our future, just like we won better wages, safer workplaces, and civil rights in our past. By joining together, we can create a program that works for all of us, no matter where we work, not just the lucky few.

Time is a precious resource, and for most Americans taking time off is something they simply can't afford. As of 2019, only 19% of people had access to paid leave through their employer. Often, those with the fewest resources are the hardest hit and can't get the benefits associated with family leave, including the ability to nurture newborn or adopted children or to take care of their own serious illness or injury. This is particularly true for low-income families and people of color. Black and Latino people are twice as likely to report needing leave but not being able to take it. A universal paid family and medical leave program would promote health equity and reduce struggles for families by improving the health and well-being for all Americans, regardless of income and race.

One of the values we hold dear is being there for our family. No one should keep you from a spouse battling cancer, a parent nearing their final days, or a new baby needing attention. You should not have to risk losing your job or paycheck because you are providing care. Too many Americans can't make ends meet and can't afford to take time off to care for themselves or their family. That's why we need a program that guarantees you can be with your loved ones and still earn a living while you do it.

When a family member is sick or a loved one needs help, we will do whatever is needed to ensure they get the care they need. However, too many people in this country can't miss a paycheck in order to care for themselves or their families without the risk of economic hardship

⁵ ggrado. Don't Rob Paulette to Pay Paulette—Work Need Paid Leave, Not Loans, January 8, 2020. <https://azcapitoltimes.com/news/2020/01/08/dont-rob-paulette-to-pay-paulette-workers-need-paid-leave-not-loans/>

or even financial ruin. Taking care of the people you love shouldn't force you to choose between working to support your family and losing pay and benefits when you take time to care for them. That's why we need a law that guarantees all workers can be with their loved ones AND earn a living—no exceptions.

Family comes first, but today too many people are forced to part with their babies, parents, or spouses when they need care. Our nation should be a place where everyone enjoys full and equal opportunity, no matter where they work and whether they are white, black, or brown. We are strongest when we all have a fair chance to achieve our full potential, contributing fully to our economy and society. When everyone has paid time to care for themselves or their families in times of need, the benefits flow to individuals, communities, and our nation as a whole.

Overview of Research

The following is a summary of the research conducted by Lake Research Partners, who conducted six focus groups in May 2019 and a national online survey in October 2019. This summary reports the research findings and describes audience reactions. Therefore, the messaging and points included below should be viewed as a report of the findings and not necessarily recommendations, which are covered above.

Audience Considerations

In any communications strategy, knowing the audience you are hoping to influence is crucial. Each message should be tailored to that specific audience's needs. A narrative can span several audiences, with different language and points using the same general themes. A flexible narrative will be able to inspire messages to motivate our base, expand our constituency, bring along persuadables, and neutralize the opposition's effect on all of these groups. We do not need to spend time and resources trying to change the mind of the opposition—or even fighting with them. Instead, we should focus on how to address any influence they have over the audiences of the middle and draw distinctions between our approach and motivations and theirs, giving persuadable audiences a side they want to join.

The research divided participants into three audience segmentations and defined them as follows:

Base

- ▶ Strongly favor a nationwide program to guarantee access to up to 12 weeks per year of PAID family and medical leave to care for a new child joining their household through birth, adoption, or foster care; an aging or seriously ill family member; or their own serious health condition.
- ▶ Believe it is very important for America to establish a nationwide program to guarantee access to up to 12 weeks per year of PAID family and medical leave.

- ▶ Strongly favor a proposal that includes an option for all types of people to take paid leave—ranging from new mothers to someone supporting a family member who is deployed.

Characteristics of the Base

- ▶ 22% of adults
- ▶ Are likely to be very concerned that low-income, Black, and Hispanic people are less likely to have paid leave.
- ▶ About three-quarters agree that people, including low-income people and people of color, face barriers to accessing health care and can't afford to take time from work and that the burden is on people and families.
- ▶ More likely to be women and Democrats.

Opposition

- ▶ Oppose a nationwide program to guarantee access to up to 12 weeks per year of PAID family and medical leave to care for a new child joining their household through birth, adoption, or foster care; an aging or seriously ill family member; or their own serious health condition before messaging.
- ▶ Oppose a nationwide paid family and medical leave program after messaging.

Characteristics of the Opposition

- ▶ 10% of adults
- ▶ Are most acutely concerned about abuse, trusting the government to run it, waste, and the impact on small business.
- ▶ Believe we can't afford a program, it is too hard on small business, and it is each person's responsibility to take care of their own family—the government should stay out of it.
- ▶ More likely to be men, older than age 65, white, and Republican.

Persuadables are defined as anyone who is not a part of the Base or the Opposition.

Characteristics of Persuadables

- ▶ 67% of adults
- ▶ Are generally favorable toward a paid family and medical leave program.
- ▶ More closely reflect demographics of the general public.⁶

⁶ Lake Research Partners Paid Family and Medical Leave: Findings based on Focus Groups and a National Survey. November 2019



Demographics	Total	Base	Opp.	Pers.
Men	48	35	64	49
Women	52	64	36	51
Under 30	21	17	17	23
30-39	17	19	10	17
40-49	16	19	12	15
50-64	25	27	27	24
Over 65	22	17	34	21
White	59	61	70	57
AA	13	16	7	13
Latino	16	15	6	18
Asian/PI	7	6	9	7
Native Am.	2	2	3	2
Northeast	18	20	18	18
Midwest	20	17	23	21
South	38	42	32	37
West	23	21	26	24
Democrat	44	59	17	43
Independent	14	10	19	14
Republican	35	25	56	35

Key Findings: Support for Paid Family and Medical Leave Policies

- ▶ By a three-to-one margin, people side with an argument that the United States should ensure all employers nationwide adopt a paid family and medical leave program that is available to everyone (65%) over an argument that would maintain the status quo by letting employers choose whether to provide their employees paid leave (22%).
- ▶ Across every demographic and attitudinal subgroup, people side with the idea that the United States should ensure all employers adopt a universal paid family and medical leave program.
- ▶ Only the Opposition sides with employers deciding.
- ▶ Women, those under 30 and in their 40s, African Americans, those with a disability connection, Democrats, and the Base have the widest margins in favor of a national program.
- ▶ Three-quarters favor and 6 in 10 strongly favor a nationwide program to guarantee access to up to 12 weeks per year of PAID family and medical leave to care for a new child joining their household through birth, adoption, or foster care; an aging or seriously ill family member; or their own serious health condition.



Audience Considerations

- ▶ Across subgroups, two-thirds or more favor a national program.
- ▶ The strongest favorability comes from women, those in their 30s, African Americans, Latinx people, parents, those living with an aging relative, those who have a disability or an immediate family member or close friend with a disability, and Democrats.
- ▶ Three-quarters believe it is important for America to establish a nationwide program to guarantee access to up to 12 weeks of paid leave. Information about FMLA does not impact views.
- ▶ By wide margins across every demographic and attitudinal subgroup, people think it is important to establish a nationwide program.
- ▶ Those who are most likely to think it is important are people in their 30s, African Americans, Latinx people, parents, those who have a disability or an immediate family member or close friend with a disability, and Democrats.

Key Findings: Types of Leave and for Whom

- ▶ At least half of people strongly favor eligibility for certain scenarios, including for a personal need or family need due to a serious illness or injury, for new mothers, or to care for veterans. The best-testing are someone with a personal illness, condition, or injury; new mothers; and someone with an immediate family member with a serious illness, condition, or injury.
- ▶ Although about two-thirds favor eligibility to care for service members, new fathers, or new foster parents or to support a family member who is deployed, fewer than half strongly favor these scenarios.
- ▶ People are open to the idea that godparents, chosen family, friends who are like family, or other relatives should be included in the paid family leave program.

Key Findings – Length of Leave

- People favor every length of leave tested, but the most intense and broadest support is for a 12-week program. As the length increases, favorability decreases.

% Strongly Favor	
12 weeks	53
16 weeks	37
20 weeks	31
6 months	27



% Strongly Favor

A person who has a serious illness, health condition, or injury of their own which prevents them from working for a period of time	63
Mothers when they have a baby or adopt a child	60
A person who has an immediate family member with a serious illness, health condition, or injury	58
A person who is providing care for an elderly family member	54
A person who is providing care for a sick family member	53
A person who is providing care for a family member with a disability	52
A person who is providing care for a veteran's needs	50
A person who is providing care for a service member's needs	48
Fathers when they have a baby or adopt a child	48
Mothers when they foster a child	46
A person who is supporting a family member in the military during deployment	44
Fathers when they foster a child	42

Audience Considerations

- ▶ Younger people, parents, and those who are living with an aging family member are the most likely to agree.
- ▶ Only people older than age 50 and the Opposition disagree.
- ▶ Participants' definition of "family" was broad and expansive, becoming situational in some minds by bringing in the "auntie" or other non-nuclear family under the umbrella of covered paid leave situations, but most believed at a minimum that the core family—parent, child, sibling, grandparent—would be covered.

Key Findings—Favorability of Aspects of a National Program

- ▶ People favor all aspects of a national paid family and medical leave program, with few who oppose. The most favorable are as follows:
 - ▶ Eligibility for all, including low-income employees, hourly employees, and contractors
 - ▶ Covering all families, including LGBTQ families
 - ▶ Eligibility for people who work at businesses of all sizes

In a second tier are including part-time employees, a requirement that people earn income from employment during the year prior to needing leave, pro-rated rates for part-time employees, and funding the program through a small payroll tax.

Key Findings—Role of Government

- ▶ By a 33-point margin, people side with an argument that government should have an active role to ensure people can care for themselves and their families without experiencing financial harm (59%) rather than each person is responsible for their own family and government should stay out (26%).
- ▶ Only the Opposition thinks the government should stay out.
- ▶ When framed as “to ensure people can care for themselves and their families without experiencing financial harm,” Republicans side with the active role argument (49%) over government staying out (35%) by 13 points.
- ▶ Persuadables side with the active role argument (59%) over government staying out (23%) by a 36-point margin.
- ▶ Similarly, by a 30-point margin, people side with an argument that government should have an active role to guarantee a basic standard of living for families (58%) rather than each person is responsible for their own family and government should stay out (28%).
- ▶ Only Republicans and the Opposition think the government should stay out.
- ▶ Republican women split between the two arguments, and younger Republicans side by wide margins with the government playing an active role. It is Republican men and older Republicans who are driving the sentiment that government should stay out.
- ▶ Persuadables side with the active role argument (54%) over government staying out (27%) by a two-to-one margin.

Key Findings—Small Business

- ▶ While small business is a vulnerability, we can contest this. By 20 points, people agree that a national program would take the burden off small business (53%) rather than an argument that says leave is too hard on small businesses (33%).
- ▶ Republicans split and the Opposition sides with this being a burden on small business.
- ▶ Persuadables side with the taking the burden off small business argument (49%) over government staying out (33%) by a 16-point margin.
- ▶ Although participants across groups were supportive of 12 weeks paid leave, they also shared reservations around a small business’s ability to operate while offering such leave. Concerns about the employer’s ability to afford paying two workers at the same time also were echoed by the small business owners.

Key Findings—Doubts about a National Program

- ▶ Support a coherent “drumbeat” of stories, messages, and events—both short and long term
- ▶ The idea that we cannot afford a national program is the strongest opposition frame (34%). People still side with the idea of pooling contributions to afford it (49%) but by just a 14-point margin.
- ▶ Republicans and the Opposition side with not being able to afford it.
- ▶ Persuadables side with the pooling contributions argument (46%) over the can’t afford it argument (34%) by a 12-point margin.
- ▶ Participants were more likely to believe “a national program would ensure standards of living for people and greater economic security for us all” rather than “this sounds like a great idea, but we just can’t afford it.”
- ▶ Doubts about a national program are low overall and driven by Republicans and the Opposition.
- ▶ About a third are very concerned that people will abuse a national program and that small businesses can’t operate with their employees taking off for weeks or months.
- ▶ In a second tier of concerns are this being a national big government tax and program, people paying in who won’t use it, it being too hard to fairly administer, and distrust in government.
- ▶ The only concern that people push back on is that the program will be wasteful.
- ▶ Persuadable voters resemble the Base more than the Opposition. The strongest doubts among Persuadables are that small businesses can’t operate if their employees can take time off for weeks or months (33% very concerned) and people will abuse the program (31% very concerned).

Methodology

Online Dial Survey

Lake Research Partners designed and administered this dial survey that was conducted online from October 17th–29th, 2019. The base and the oversamples were in the field those dates, and the advocates sample was in the field until November 14. The survey reached a total of 1,000 adults with oversamples of 100 African Americans, 150 Latinx, 150 Asian American/Pacific Islanders, 150 Native Americans, and 100 Advocates. The sample was drawn from an online panel of listed adults, and the advocate sample was drawn from a client list.

The base sample was weighted slightly by gender, region, age, race, race by gender, party identification, and educational attainment. The African American oversample was weighted by gender, region, age, and educational attainment. The Latinx oversample was weighted by gender, region, party identification, and educational attainment. The Asian American/Pacific Islander oversample and the Native American oversample were weighted by gender, region,



age, party identification, and educational attainment. The oversamples were weighted down into the base to reflect their actual proportion of the population of adults nationwide.

The margin of error for the total sample is $\pm 3.1\%$. The margin of error for the oversamples is $\pm 9.8\%$.

Focus Groups

Lake Research Partners conducted six in-person focus groups in May 2019 broken down as follows:

City	Date	Composition
Detroit, MI	May 6	White Non-College, Mixed Gender
		African American, Mixed Gender
Phoenix, AZ	May 7	Native American Women
		Latinas
Raleigh, NC	May 13	Small Business Owners, Mixed Gender
		Asian/Pacific Islander Women

Participants were recruited to reflect a mix of age, marital status, educational attainment, employment status, party identification, parental status, and caregiver status. Those who were strongly opposed to a program that allows people 12 weeks per year of paid family and medical leave that working families can use when they need to care for a new baby or adopted child, when they need to care for a seriously ill family member, or when they have an illness were not invited to participate in the focus groups.

The Opportunity Agenda is a social justice communication lab. We collaborate with leaders to move hearts and minds, driving lasting policy and culture change. We bring the inspirational voices of opportunity and possibility to social justice issues through communication expertise and creative engagement.

To learn more, please visit our website at www.opportunityagenda.org.