

State of Vermont

Department of Health

Office of the Commissioner

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Agency of Human Services

February 11, 2016

Representative Helen Head, Chair  
House Committee on General, Housing, and Military Affairs  
115 State Street, Room 41  
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

RE: H. 808, An Act Relating to Accommodations for Pregnant Employees

Dear Representative Head:

The rights, safety, health and wellbeing of pregnant workers are critical public health issues, and directly linked to maternal and child health outcomes.

Stress caused by a lack of reasonable accommodations and the threat of unemployment can put strain on the health of both mother and child. Connections can be made between high levels of stress during pregnancy and an increased risk of premature birth and low birthweight. Pregnant workers who need income but lack reasonable accommodations often feel forced to continue working in unsafe environments in order to preserve their employment. When women are forced out of the workforce due to pregnancy the stress associated with job loss can be devastating and can increase the risk of having a premature baby or a baby with low birth weight. Low income workers are especially vulnerable and can experience long term consequences due to financial hardship as a result of discrimination during pregnancy.

Stories from Vermont women about their experiences in the workplace during pregnancy show that pregnant women are often denied small workplace modifications such as additional restroom breaks, release from lifting heavy objects, being supported to sit when necessary, or being provided adequate time for healthy snacks, lunch and water breaks. Denial of these modifications compromises the health of pregnant women and can negatively impact birth outcomes. In some cases, the failure to provide these accommodations has led to being forced to take time off without pay, or to terminate employment.

There is strong evidence that some occupational environments and exposures during pregnancy can pose a risk to maternal and child health, and therefore pregnancy accommodations have potential to improve child and maternal health outcomes. In addition, there is clear evidence that improving maternal and child health outcomes through reasonable pregnancy accommodations would decrease health disparities. Providing accommodations for pregnant workers benefits both maternal and infant health and will help ensure that Vermont women have healthy pregnancies and healthy babies.

Sincerely,



Harry Chen, MD  
Commissioner of Health

