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Please find below Gov. Peter Shumlin's weekly op-ed. Let me know if you have any questions.

Thanks,

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Helping Vermonters Succeed

By Governor Peter Shumlin

It's no secret that the economic recovery across America has been felt most by those with higher incomes. For working families in America, the recovery has been slow to take root. And for those fighting to get into the middle class, the recovery has been almost non-existent, with many still struggling. Vermont is not immune to this nationwide trend. That's why I am fighting hard to make sure that we have an economy in Vermont that works for every single Vermonter, not just those at the top. This week we took two important steps toward that goal.

April 14th marked Equal Pay Day in America – the date that symbolizes how far into this year women must work to make up for the extra money men earned in the previous year. Nationwide, women earn only 78 cents to every dollar men do. Vermont does better than most, but at 83 cents to the dollar, the gap for Vermont women is still too wide. We've taken steps in Vermont to reduce the wage gap and help women succeed in the workplace by passing an Equal Pay Act, prohibiting employers from retaliating against employees who inquire about co-workers' wages, preventing discrimination against a mother who nurses a child at work, and permitting an employee to request a flexible work arrangement. While these steps have yielded good progress, we need to do more to ensure women have the same opportunities to succeed in the workplace as men do. We need equal pay for men and women to be not just the law but the reality.

That's why I stood with the Vermont Commission on Women to launch the Vermont Equal Pay Compact in Vermont. Modeled after a similar initiative in Boston, the Vermont Equal Pay Compact asks signing employers to commit to at least three concrete steps to help close the wage gap between men and women. Some examples include improving strategies in compensation and promotion, hiring, negotiations, wage transparency, performance evaluation, and workplace culture. I was proud to make the State of Vermont the first employer to sign on to the Compact and to stand with businesses like Main Street Landing and Vermont Energy Investment Corporation in Burlington, the Alchemist in Waterbury, and Red Hen Baking Company in Middlesex that also signed. I hope more Vermont employers will sign on to this initiative that will help boost wages for Vermont women, improve economic security for women and their families, and make progress towards the overdue right of equal pay for men and women.

This week we also took another important step to help working Vermont families by supporting an effort in the legislature to pass earned sick leave legislation. Most Vermonters agree that if you're sick you shouldn't be faced with the decision to either go to work and put others at risk or miss work, sacrifice your paycheck, and potentially lose your job. In Vermont we know that many employers agree that employees should have time off when they are sick or have to care for sick family members. Many companies already provide fair earned leave policies. But some do not, and their workers face this difficult and unfair dilemma.

The difficulty has always been turning the principle of earned sick leave into workable legislation that balances in a thoughtful way the rights of workers with the needs of businesses. In the past, I have been skeptical of proposals that did not do enough to recognize the costs and burdens to businesses this legislation might create. This year, I am encouraged by a new earned sick bill being championed by Reps. Tristan Toleno from Brattleboro and Sarah Copeland-Hanzas from Bradford that I think goes a long way toward striking the right balance for employers and employees.

Being business owners themselves, Reps. Toleno and Copeland-Hanzas have crafted a bill that doesn't place unfair burdens on those businesses that already offer earned sick leave to their employees while also putting in place sensible reforms to ensure up to 60,000 working Vermonters who currently lack this protection can take care of themselves when they are sick without risking their job. The new proposal earned my support because it exempts employers that already have good policies, provides more flexibility regarding how other employers meet the earned sick time requirements, and ensures that there are significant waiting periods and reasonable accruals, while requiring this important protection be available to more Vermont workers.

Combined with our efforts to raise the minimum wage, boost Vermonters' wages through job training programs, make college more affordable and accessible, and control skyrocketing health care and property tax costs that are eating away at Vermonters' paychecks, these equal pay and earned sick leave policies will help extend the economic recovery to those who have not yet felt it. Together we must make Vermont's economy work for every single Vermonter.