



Heilbrunn Department of Population and Family Health

New York City Council Member James Vacca
3040 East Tremont Ave., Room 104
Bronx, New York 10461

November 29, 2012

Dear Council Member Vacca:

I write to thank you for your efforts to address pregnancy discrimination and promote healthy pregnancies by championing New York City Council Intro. 974, the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act. Throughout my career I have worked to advance women's health as a practicing obstetrician and gynecologist, as a professor of Population and Family Health and Obstetrics –Gynecology at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and College of Physicians and Surgeons, as a consultant on infant and maternal mortality to the New York City Department of Health, and in numerous other roles in the US and abroad. Several years ago, I received a Fulbright New Century Scholarship to do a cross national comparative study of policies regarding work and pregnancy. I strongly support City Council Intro. 974 to promote the health and economic security of pregnant women, their babies, and their families.

Three-quarters of women entering the workforce today will be pregnant and employed at some point during their careers. Some of these women—especially those in physically strenuous jobs—will face a conflict between their duties at work and the demands of pregnancy. In 2008, I co-authored a report to assess the research on reproductive, maternal and infant/child health outcomes associated with work-related factors and to make the public health case for work-family policies on the local, state, and federal levels. Our literature review revealed that physically demanding work—including prolonged standing, long work hours, irregular work schedules, heavy lifting, and high physical activity—has consistently been shown to be associated with a statistically significantly increased risk of preterm delivery and low birth weight. High levels of physical activity at work and work-related stress have also been found to be associated with increased risk for pregnancy-induced hypertension.

Current law does not ensure that pregnant women who need modest workplace modifications can have access to the modifications needed to stay healthy and stay on the job. When pregnant women are denied reasonable accommodations, many are forced to continue in their jobs under unhealthy conditions, risking their own health and the health of their future babies. Other pregnant women denied work accommodations are forced out of the workforce and may experience serious income loss and associated stress, which in turn has a negative impact on maternal and infant health outcomes. In contrast,

women who are able to keep working during pregnancy may be able to take longer periods of leave following childbirth, which in turn facilitates breastfeeding, bonding with and caring for a new child, and recovering from childbirth.

We need legislation in New York City to minimize adverse working conditions for pregnant women while protecting their wages and seniority. City Council Intro. 974 would empower women and provide clarity for employers about their responsibilities while contributing to public health. I applaud your leadership in this area of improving work conditions for pregnant women and stand ready to help you achieve passage of this legislation.

Sincerely,

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