

# Political momentum building for family leave law

By **CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE**  
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Advocates are optimistic that in 2019, Oregon could become one of a small but growing handful of states to require some form of paid family and medical leave.

“We do believe 2019 is our time,” said Lili Hoag, political director for Family Forward Oregon, a nonprofit advocacy organization.

About six months out from the start of the 2019 legislative session, it’s not yet clear what a specific proposal would look like, says House Majority Leader Jennifer Williamson, D-Portland. But a group of advocates, legislators and other stakeholders has been meeting to discuss ideas as part of a work group focused on issues related to developing a paid family leave program.

“The vast majority of Oregonians do not have access to paid family and medical leave. That means too many families are forced to make impossible choices when it comes to caring for a new child or a seriously ill family member,” Williamson said Friday in a written statement. “... Momentum is certainly building as we head toward the 2019 session. It’s past time for our policies to catch up with the realities of how Oregonians live and work.”

## Five states pass



Photo contributed by Ben Verhoeven

**Peoria Gardens owner and operator Ben Verhoeven of Albany offers his year-round employees 12 weeks of paid family leave when they become parents. He took two weeks of paid family leave to help his wife, Kathryn Weeks, when their children, 3-year-old Thea Verhoeven and 3-month-old John Dallas Verhoeven, were born.**

## Legislation

The federal Family and Medical Leave Act, signed into law in 1993 by President Bill Clinton, requires certain employers to allow employees to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave to care for a new baby, adopted or foster child, or to take care of a sick relative. A paid leave law would effectively require that new parents and those taking care of sick relatives who take time off

work for those duties have an opportunity to get compensated for that leave time in some way.

Attempts to pass paid family leave legislation failed this year and in 2017. Five states — California, New York, Rhode Island, New Jersey and Washington — have passed paid family leave laws, as has Washington, D.C.

Ben Verhoeven, owner and operator of Peoria Gar-

dens Inc., a nursery in Albany, gave himself a paid, two-week paternity leave and then took some half days when his daughter was born in 2015. After that experience, and after his wife started volunteering for Family Forward, he decided to offer 12 weeks of paid parental leave to his year-round employees.

“I couldn’t stand there and applaud her while I didn’t offer generous poli-

cies like that to our employees,” Verhoeven said. “So we just did it, because I could afford to take two weeks off, but I knew there were a lot of my employees who couldn’t afford that, let alone 12 weeks. That’s just not financially feasible for many families.”

Verhoeven, who also took two weeks off when his son was born early this year, has 24 year-round employees. He hires about 40 seasonal workers every spring, but doesn’t offer paid leave to those workers, he said.

## ‘It’s ready to pass’

Some business groups are wary that a state paid family leave program could raise costs for employers. Jenny Dresler, director of state public policy for the Oregon Farm Bureau, says many of the state’s agricultural employers are already feeling the squeeze.

The state’s minimum wage will continue to increase gradually during the next several years, and a paid sick leave law that went into effect in 2016 requires employers with 10 or more employees to provide up to 40 hours of paid sick leave per year.

“Commodity prices are fairly low in the global and domestic commodity markets, so you’re looking at folks who have very little capital left to expend on additional programs,” Dresler said.

If the paid family leave proposal includes a new tax to fund the program — such as a payroll tax — that would require a three-fifths majority vote in both the House and the Senate.

Hoag thinks 2019 will be different from previous years, now that lawmakers have assembled a work group devoted to the issue and have the long legislative session ahead. “We believe they have the time and expertise and have really worked through the details of this bill enough that in 2019, it’s ready to pass,” she said.

Advocates hope the program is a benefit run and administered by the state, allowing at least 12 weeks of paid time off, and that it covers close relationships between people who are not blood relatives, or “chosen families.”

Family Forward Oregon hosts a screening of a documentary, “Zero Weeks,” about the lack of paid family leave in the United States, at Southeast Portland’s Clinton Street Theater at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, June 5. The film will be followed by a panel discussion with Williamson, Yee Won Chong, a racial and transgender justice consultant and strategist, and Reyna Lopez, executive director of PCUN (Pinceros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste), a Woodburn farmworkers’ union.



Contributed photo by Karen Fulbright

**Marie Norris displayed some of her Quilts of Valor on Saturday during Flora School Days.**

## NORRIS: Driven about creating military quilts

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or no quilting experience.

The 62-year-old spent hours upon hours happily designing, cutting, sewing, basting, quilting and binding.

Perfection wasn’t the object, she said. The goal, she believed, wasn’t to craft quilts devoid of flaws.

“The last, but possibly one of the most important aspects of this quilt are the mistakes and imperfections,” Norris wrote about one of her earlier quilts. “I worried and fretted over these but then realized how important they are as they are the human aspects. While we may have been made in the image of the Good Lord, we are still only human, and as such we make mistakes and are not perfect.”

Her creations contained plenty of red, white and blue. She gifted them to veterans on formal occasions and also during impromptu moments. Often, Norris would read out loud about the veteran’s service and then drape the quilt around the person’s shoulders.

“She called it ‘wrapping a vet,’” Webb said.

“She wrapped them with honor, warmth and respect,” said Annette Frye.

Norris coached Frye during her first attempt at quilting.

“She gave me pep talks,” Frye said. “She said, ‘You can do this.’”

According to a 2012 *East Oregonian* article, Norris started quilting at six years old, accompanying her grandmother to a quilting circle in a church basement. Later, she cou-

pled her love of quilting with her passion for veterans. Family members, including her father served in the military.

Her quilter buddies described Norris as driven about producing her military quilts.

“She had such a heart for our veterans,” Frye said.

“She was full of love for them,” Webb said.

“And it just got stronger,” said fellow quilter Colleen Blackwood, who added that Norris never got political, she just loved veterans.

In 2002, before Norris joined Quilts of Valor, one of her quilts was featured in an international art exhibit on display in the home of the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan. The quilt, which took 600 hours to create, incorporated a colorful patchwork of hands and feet. The quilt, a statement against racism, suggested beauty in diversity and appeared with 50 other works in an exhibit called *Roots of Racism: Ignorance and Fear*.

Karen Fulbright, of Pilot Rock, was one of the last local quilters to see Norris since they both attended Flora School Days. Norris, she said, displayed a few of her Quilts of Valor and chatted up passersby about the organization.

Fulbright admitted she hadn’t known her long, but said Norris was a woman who motivated others.

“She was a person who created inspiration,” Fulbright said.

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## BELIEVE: Nurse examiners soothe the victims and assure them that they are safe and in control

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talk to community groups, law enforcement agencies and other organizations. The message encompasses more than rape and other forms of sexual assault.

“It can also be bullying and domestic violence,” Davis said. “If somebody comes to you about something, you start by believing.”

At the emergency room, the nurse examiners soothe the victims (mostly women, but not all) and assure them they are safe and in control.

“When I start my exams, not only do I tell them we believe them, but I tell them everything is in their control,” Davis said. “I’m just there for them.”

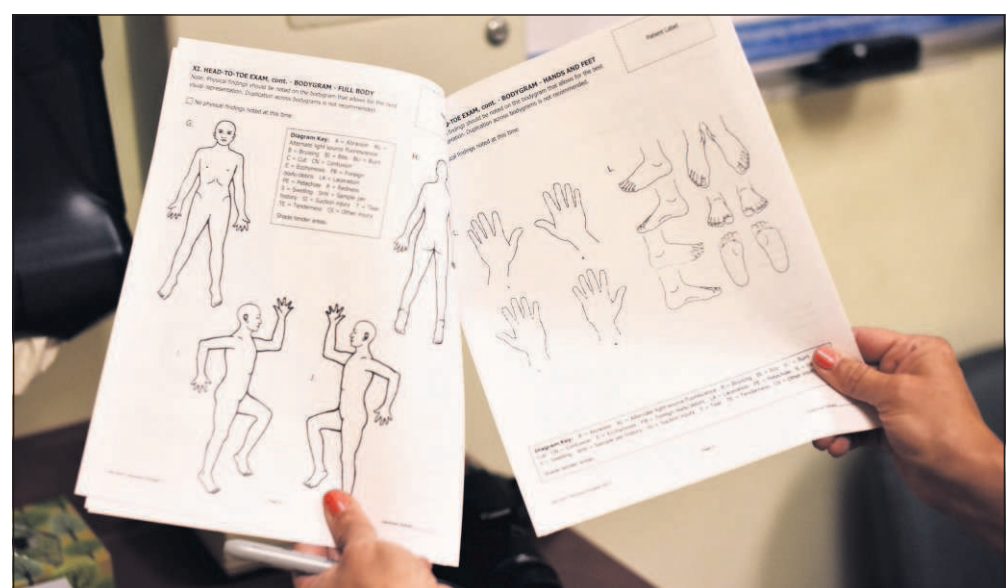
The victim can pick and choose. If she wants forensic evidence collected, but not to report the crime, that’s fine. If she simply wants to spill her guts, that’s OK too. Prophylactic drugs to guard against STDs are another option, as well as HIV testing.

“We let them be the driver,” Stephens said.

A victim may choose to have evidence collected, but not report. The evidence, labeled only with a number, will go to the Oregon State Police Crime Lab where it will stay in cold storage indefinitely. If the victim later decides to report the assault, the evidence will be there.

Many of the victims come in during late night and early morning hours, but not always. The busiest time of year is during the Christmas holidays.

“I’ve had some victims who are hysterical and crying, but adamant they aren’t going to report, but want evidence collected,” Davis said. “They’re not able to talk about it at that moment — it’s still too overwhelming.”



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

**When a sexual assault victim is examined nurses will record as much detail as possible in the head to toe examination.**

Victims often blame themselves, Stephens said.

“They tell themselves ‘I liked him and thought I was safe with him, but maybe I shouldn’t have kissed him,’” she said. “All of us should have the right to go out on a date, have a drink, kiss a boy or kiss a girl and not feel like we’re going to be raped.”

The nurses work closely with the Hermiston Police Department, especially investigative detective Randy Studebaker. Studebaker supports the Start by Believing effort. He said victims often wait days, weeks, months or years to report sexual assault if they do at all. The #MeToo movement kicked off changes in thinking, he said, and now this effort is going along a parallel track.

“Historically, it’s not very good how society has treated victims,” he said. “As the problem comes out of the dark, we develop and grow and evolve.”

He said he starts by believing when a victim comes forward.

“False reports, while they do happen, are exceedingly

rare,” he said.

From there he and fellow detectives see where the evidence leads. Often there isn’t enough to convict.

“Sexual assault cases can be incredibly challenging,” he said. “In a lot of these cases, only two people were present and it happened years ago in the dark.”

The detectives knock on doors looking for anyone who might have seen or heard anything, comb through emails and texts and look at physical evidence. The department is currently working on about a dozen cases. Most attacks, however, will never be reported.

“This is a societal problem,” Studebaker said. “In my own personal life, I know people who chose not to report. How do you quantify that? I don’t know. One is too many.”

Meghan Thomas, of the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, said the Start by Believing effort gets people thinking about society’s tendency to brush off victims’ claims.

“We need to ask ourselves, ‘Why am I questioning? Why don’t I believe?’” Thomas said. “There is an inherent distrust people have. It’s an uncomfortable subject.”

Even if victims choose not to report, she hopes they will find someone who starts by believing.

“Talking about it can be really healing,” she said.

The nurses hope the Start by Believing program will lead to acceptance and ultimately more reporting and convictions. Convictions have the potential to thwart additional rapes.

“Rapists attack an average of six times,” Stephens said. “Hopefully, if we have an increase in reporting, we’ll have more perpetrators off the street.”

“One supportive response could mean five fewer victims,” Davis said. “If someone comes to you, start by believing.”

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EO file photo

**Principal Lori Hale reads a clue for a group of kindergartners on a scavenger hunt during their first day of school at the Hawthorne Early Learning Center in Pendleton.**

## LITERACY: Incoming students are more prepared

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to try to boost pre-kindergarten literacy.

Matt Yoshioka, the district’s director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, said first grade teachers are starting to notice incoming students are more prepared for first grade than they had been previously.

For school board member Steve Umberger, the data was vindication.

“This is just the proof of why we chose to do the early learning center,” he said. “It’ll be exciting to see how this progresses on through.” Finished in 2015, the early learning center is a centralized kindergarten in addition to offering space to Head Start and daycare centers.

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