

Commerce Committee

Public Testimony of Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)
S.B. 407: *An Act Concerning the Development and Implementation of a Post-COVID-19 Women's Return to Work Economic Development Plan*
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The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide nonprofit that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For forty-eight years, CWEALF has been a leading advocate for policies that advance the economic security of women across our state and promote gender equity in the workplace.

Through CWEALF's Legal Education Program, we provide information, education, referrals, and bilingual advocacy to the Connecticut community to ensure that all individuals in our state have access to legal justice. The majority of CWEALF's clients are low-income women with at least one dependent, many of whom have experienced the severe economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We support S.B. 407: *An Act Concerning the Development and Implementation of a Post-COVID-19 Women's Return to Work Economic Development Plan*. As Connecticut continues to recover from the COVID-19 crisis, our success will depend heavily on how we respond to the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on women, specifically women of color, in our state.

The COVID-19 pandemic and recession has hit women the hardest across our state and the nation. Women, especially women of color, are overrepresented in low-wage jobs that are underpaid and inadequately protected on the frontlines of the pandemic, as well as in industries that continue to shed their workforce. For example, women in Connecticut comprise 49% of the state's workforce but make up 78% of the healthcare workforce, 67% of the education workforce, and 56% of accommodation and food service industries.¹

Research on the impact of COVID-19 on women in Connecticut also indicates that since March 2020, women have filed the majority of initial and continuing unemployment claims in our state. Significantly more women of color have experienced loss of income than white women, and more than 1 in 3 of initial unemployment claims filed by women were by women of color.²

¹ [Essential Equity: Women, COVID-19 and Rebuilding CT](#)

² See note 1

Across the nation, the economic impacts from COVID-19 are far from over. Recent numbers show that approximately 48,000 women ages 20 and over left the labor force last month, meaning they are neither working nor looking for work. This brings the total number of women who have left the labor force since February 2020 to over 1.1 million.² By comparison, 479,000 men ages 20 and over entered the labor force last month. This means that for every woman who left the labor force last month, nearly 10 men entered the labor force and women now make up all labor force leavers since February 2020.³

Providing women solutions to the barriers that keep them out of the workforce, will assist in advancing Connecticut's economic growth. If even just 1-3% of mothers to children under the age of 18 leave the labor force permanently, Connecticut could see a loss of between \$150 and \$500 million in annual wages for one year alone - numbers that could be a lot higher when accounting for lost income or sales tax revenue.⁴

As the risks from COVID-19 decrease and women return to work, S.B 407 makes small and incremental improvements to address the much larger, pervasive issues involving gender pay gaps through the incorporation of paid internships. Additionally, the bill calls for return to work initiatives that include professional mentorships, educational coaching services, and child care and transit opportunities. All of which are current barriers to women, especially women of color, from being able to secure a livelihood.

The COVID-19 health and economic crisis will erase a generation of progression toward gender equity that could take decades to regain unless action is taken. CWEALF supports S.B. 407 as a necessary action and a critical step to strengthen the state's workforce system; however, to truly improve women's lives and economic security passage of this legislation must be coupled with additional actions to improve Connecticut's child care system, strengthen access to paid sick leave, enact a fair work week for hourly workers and more. We urge lawmakers to pass legislation that combats the many barriers and provides equitable opportunities for women returning to the workforce this session.

³ <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/February-Jobs-Day.pdf>

⁴ see note 1