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A Comprehensive Assessment of Vermont's Paid Medical and Family Leave Environment

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INTRODUCTION

- Vermont has not been successful in enacting universal paid leave and currently provides paid leave options for state employees and opt-in for private businesses and the self-employed.
- This lack of guaranteed income during challenging life events forces workers to choose between financial support and caregiving responsibilities, often predominantly affecting low-income groups, communities of color, and women.
- Studies continuously demonstrate that access to paid leave promotes better long-term health outcomes, decreases stress-related illnesses, and facilitates stronger family bonds.
- The U.S. is one of the few industrialized nations without a national paid leave program, and there is a pressing need for policy reform so Vermont workers can care for themselves and their families.
- VT and NH are the only two states that do not have universal paid family leave in the NE U.S.
- We conducted this study to better understand the current landscape of 1) who has paid leave 2) who is using paid leave 3) common uses of paid leave and 4) problems to address in future policies.

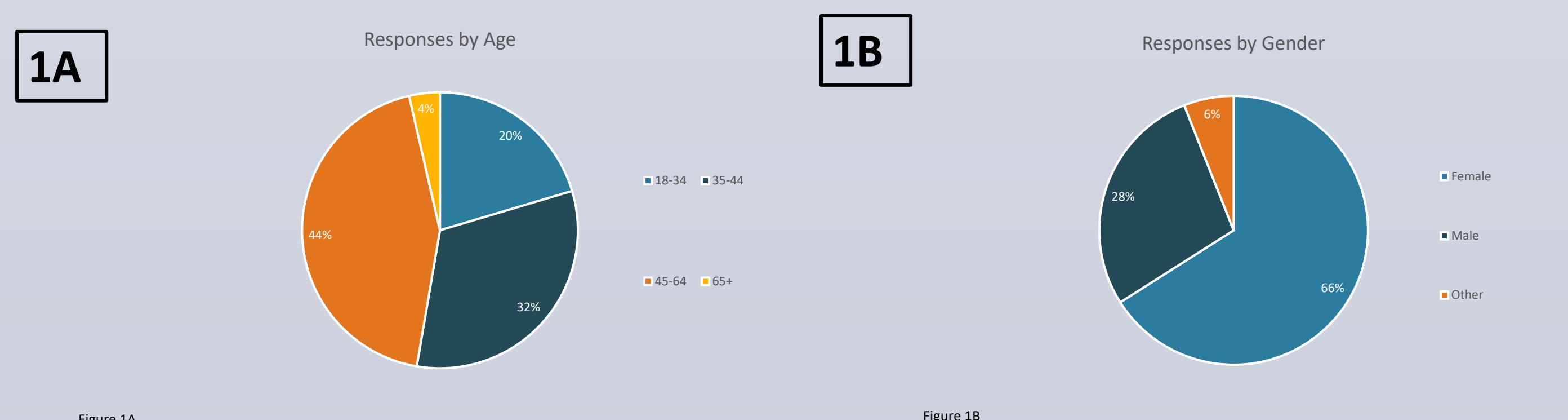
METHODS

- A 20-source literature review was conducted to explore the current landscape of paid leave nationally and to compare that to Vermont data.
- Community relationships were established by interviewing participants at Burlington Community Sites (e.g. Farmers' Markets) + community partners such as:
 - The Worker's Union and State Employee's Union
 - Community Action Agencies that serve low-income Vermonters
- A REDCap survey to gather data about paid leave in Vermont was developed and distributed.
- Microsoft Excel and SPSS statistical software was used to conduct chi squared statistical analysis. Given the dataset, descriptive analyses were used instead of inferential statistical analyses.

RESULTS: SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

723 responses were aggregated within REDCap after survey distribution.

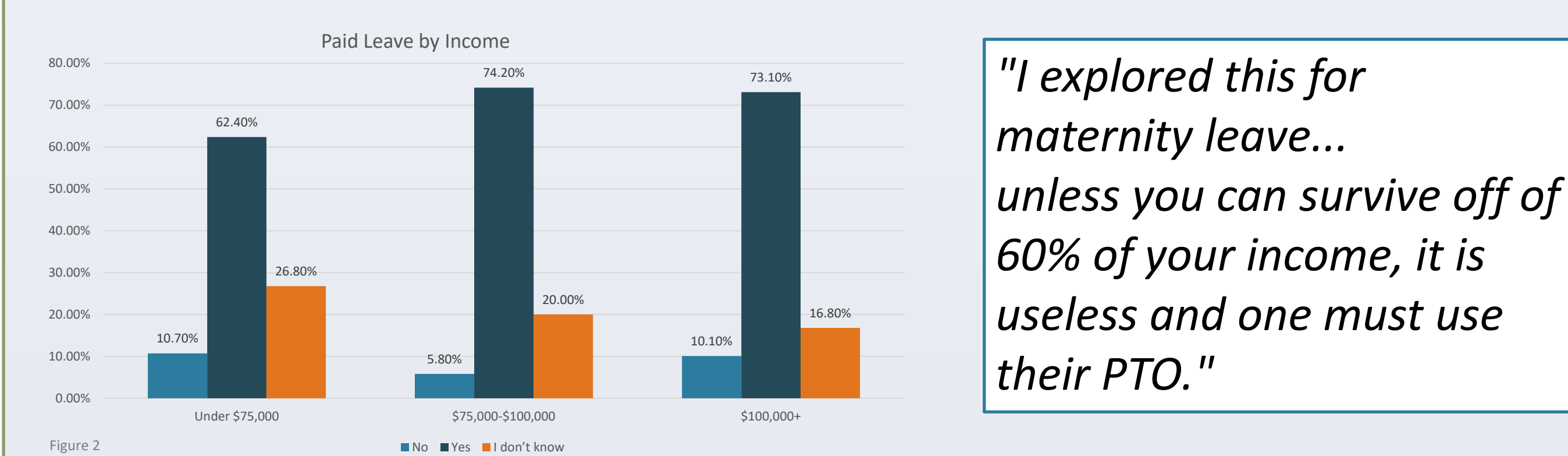
Figure 1A and 1B (below): RedCap Survey Respondents by Age and Gender



RESULTS

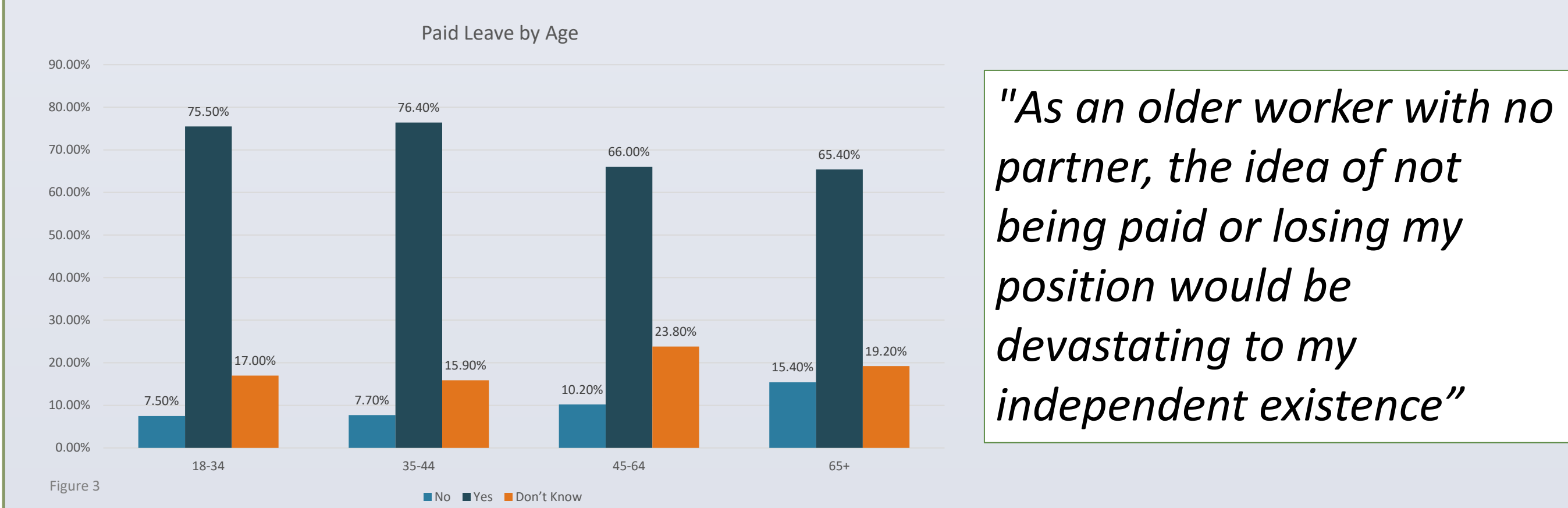
- Survey questions were formulated to characterize the utilization of current paid leave programs in VT and to pinpoint program shortcomings.
- 181 respondents shared narrative responses about their experiences with paid leave, which were organized by major category.

Figure 2: Availability of Paid Leave Programs by Income Bracket



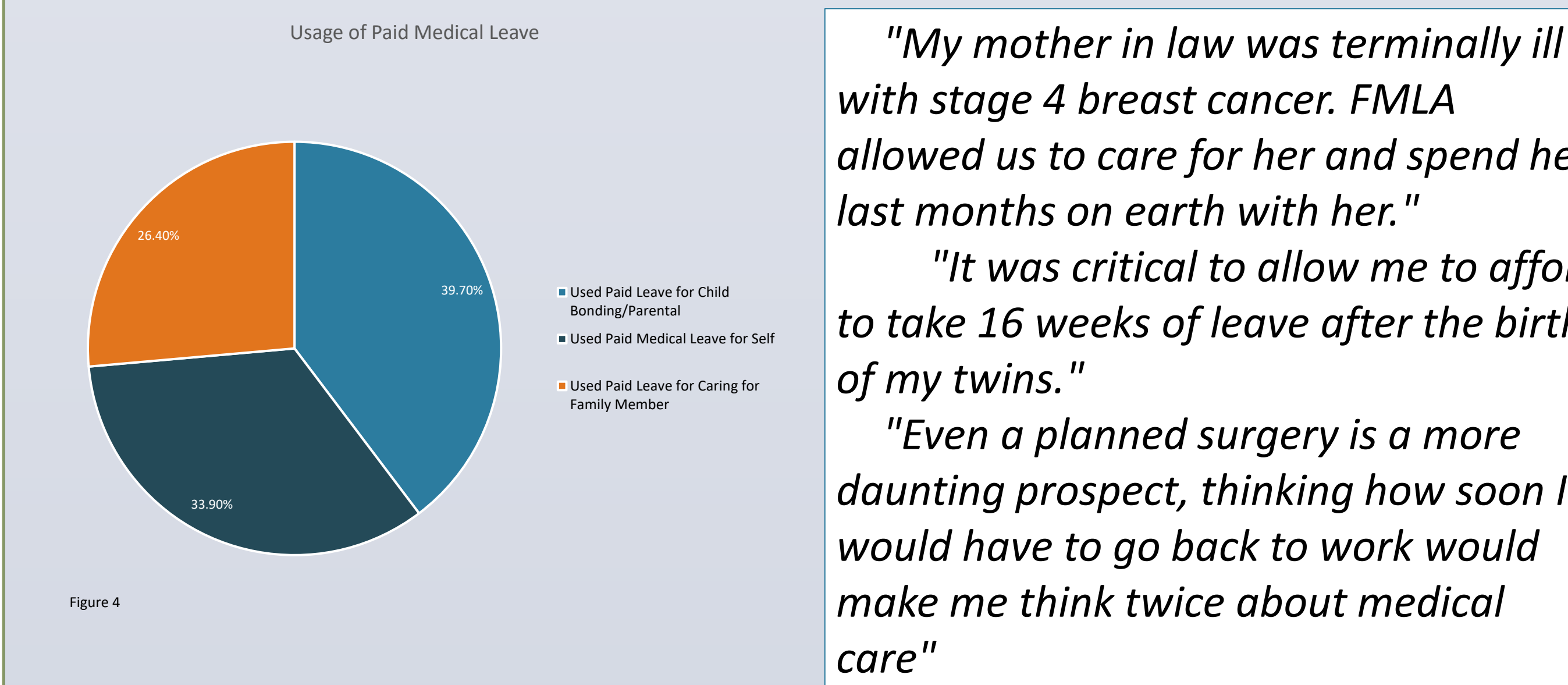
"I explored this for maternity leave... unless you can survive off of 60% of your income, it is useless and one must use their PTO."

Figure 3: Availability of Paid Leave Programs by Age Group



"As an older worker with no partner, the idea of not being paid or losing my position would be devastating to my independent existence"

Figure 4: Reasons To Use Paid Leave Programs

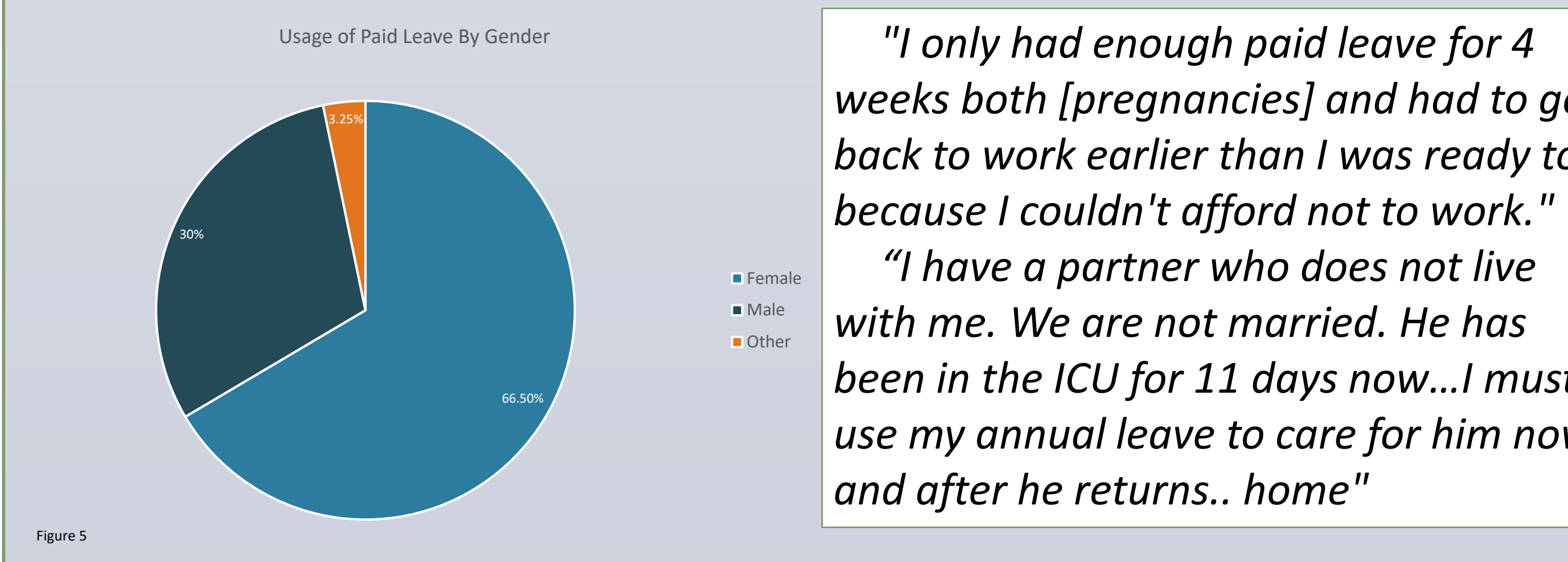


"My mother in law was terminally ill with stage 4 breast cancer. FMLA allowed us to care for her and spend her last months on earth with her."

"It was critical to allow me to afford to take 16 weeks of leave after the birth of my twins."

"Even a planned surgery is a more daunting prospect, thinking how soon I would have to go back to work would make me think twice about medical care"

Figure 5: Usage of Paid Leave Programs by Gender



"I only had enough paid leave for 4 weeks both [pregnancies] and had to go back to work earlier than I was ready to because I couldn't afford not to work."

"I have a partner who does not live with me. We are not married. He has been in the ICU for 11 days now...I must use my annual leave to care for him now and after he returns.. home"

DISCUSSION

- The Paid Leave Program in VT is utilized by individuals in:
 - Various income brackets
 - Diverse age groups
 - Various life circumstances; Child-bonding, Personal health, Familial health
 - Among all genders; Male, Female, Other
- Narrative responses continuously show dissatisfaction and note VTFAMLI is inadequate, demonstrating that people desire more equitable paid leave policies.
- Narrative responses additionally reported the desire for more transparency regarding the availability, practices and policies of the VT Paid Leave Program.
- Higher income individuals were more likely to express satisfaction with their paid leave policies, highlighting the impact of income disparities.
- Limitations: The survey was open for a short period (4 weeks) and the majority of responses were collected from state employees, which may impact generalizability.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Individuals with access to the Paid Leave Program in VT benefit medically, financially and emotionally
- Vermonters would benefit from increased access to and increased transparency regarding the availability of paid leave
- Based on narratives from respondents, access to the Paid Leave Program has reduced the burden of medical hardship on Vermonters caring for themselves and loved ones
- Future work: findings will be presented to the Vermont legislature, informing potential improvements and policy discussions at the state level

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