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Committee on Government Operations, October 11, 2023
Testimony of Elinor Jordan for House Bills 4720 and 4721

My name is Elinor Jordan, and I am a Supervising Attorney for unaccompanied immigrant children at the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center, offering services statewide. We strongly support the passage of House Bills 4720 and 4721 because we have seen how barriers to language access cause harm to immigrant communities across the state.

This issue has been particularly present as we've responded to reports of migrant child labor in Michigan this year. Most of these children live in immigrant households, where the family breadwinners speak limited English. When these adult caretakers experience labor violations, they need to have an effective recourse that allows them to continue supporting their families so children are not under pressure to work. Employers of immigrants also need to be held accountable if we want to deter the most egregious violations like child labor.

Our immigrant worker rights team recently assisted a Spanish-speaker who was working 60 hours a week but being paid less than minimum wage, and no overtime. He did not know where to go for help. Our office helped him make a wage & hour complaint with the state. Then he received a document in English only, giving him 10 days to submit additional information and a page of questions he couldn't understand. Instead of being provided a phone interview in Spanish, he continued receiving written questions in English. He depended completely on our office to communicate deadlines, translate each document, each question, and each of his answers, or otherwise give up his claims.

The majority of immigrant workers will not have a bilingual attorney advocate, and are often forced to rely on highly inaccurate interpretation in attempt to navigate these systems in English.

For example, one Spanish-speaking farmworker client attempted to rely on her 11-year-old son to help her make an unemployment account on the English-only website, because it was the only way she could submit necessary documentation.

Another Spanish-speaking farmworker client living in a migrant camp was on the phone with legal services staff when his employer and a MIOSHA investigator arrived. The investigator explained in English why he was there. The employer, allegedly interpreting, told the farmworker in Spanish that the investigator had said he needed to pack up and leave the housing immediately. Believing his employer's false interpretation, the farmworker packed up and left.

Thank you for your time and consideration of these bills that are crucial to advancing racial equity and immigrant worker rights. I welcome any questions.