

Good afternoon.

My name is Lorna Elliott-Egan, and I am the Director of the Tribal Government Services and Policy Division within the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. I am the department's primary liaison to Michigan's 12 federally recognized tribal governments and Urban Indian Health Center and it is an honor for me to be able to do this meaningful work.

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services wholeheartedly supports Senate Bills 137 and 138, which were developed in partnership with tribal children's services directors and tribal attorneys from Michigan's 12 tribal governments. This effort was initiated by the Bay Mills Indian Community when they realized that children in guardianships placed through tribal courts were unable to access the same kind of funding that children placed by state courts currently receive.

Currently, if a Native child is living on tribal land, their guardian wouldn't be eligible to receive the same financial assistance they would if that *same* child lived off tribal land. As an example, there is a family in Bay Mills who has taken on the guardianship of five siblings but is not getting any support to help take care of these children. Please imagine trying to feed and clothe an additional five family members without any support in your home. Anyone who is willing to provide this type of care to a child should receive all the support we can provide.

The purpose of the assistance payment is to support the needs of the youth while being cared for by a guardian, usually a family member. Very often these cases are closed after a guardian is appointed and the child remains with the guardian for an extended period, often until they turn 18 and age out of the system.

We all agreed that this is simply a matter of fairness to families that take on the burden of caring for children in guardianship who should receive all the support that can be provided to them to do this hard work. This group of dedicated tribal child protection professionals and MDHHS staff worked for a year to come to consensus between all the tribes on this legislation before finally moving it forward. We at MDHHS want to thank the tribes for bringing this to us in a spirit of collaboration, and we want to thank Senator Irwin and Senator Damoose for sponsoring such important legislation.

As we worked with the tribes, we also surveyed the tribal governments to get a better understanding of how many children would be eligible for these payments if the proposed amendments were adopted. The number was less than 100. While this number is small, we know this is a worthwhile endeavor because we strongly believe that Native American children in Michigan should have access to the same benefits and support as non-Native children do.

I thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bills 137 and 138 and am happy to answer any question anyone might have.