



**Testimony Presented to the
House Committee on Families, Children and Seniors**

HB 4041

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Good morning, Chairman Hooker and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 4041. My name is Alicia Guevara Warren, I am a policy analyst at the Michigan League for Public Policy, a nonpartisan policy institute dedicated to economic opportunity for all. While we agree that every child should be in school and learning, it is unclear how this legislation would help achieve this goal, and therefore, we oppose House Bill 4041.

The Family Independence Program is meant to provide temporary assistance for families experiencing financial hardship. These families are very low-income and experience many barriers, including inconsistent work schedules; quality, affordable child care; and access to reliable transportation. House Bill 4041, which is based on current DHS policy, is shortsighted, very broad and does not address school attendance issues. Furthermore, codifying this policy would tie the hands of the Department from having the flexibility to adapt and change its practices to better meet the needs of the families it serves.

The legislation fails to provide clear attendance requirements relying on the Compulsory Attendance section of the Revised School Code that a “child’s attendance shall be continuous and consecutive for the school year.” Truancy and attendance policies currently vary by school district as there is no state definition, which means that there may be inconsistencies in families losing their assistance.

House Bill 4041 would allow for the termination of benefits if a child in the family between the ages of 6 and 15 is noncompliant with the attendance requirements. It is very severe to punish an entire family for the actions of one child and will only further limit the family’s resources making it harder for the children to get to school and be prepared to learn. If the goal is to increase attendance rates, it would seem more logical for caseworkers to work with the family to identify and understand the reasons for the high number of absences to help address the root of the problem in order to connect the family with the appropriate tools and resources to improve a child’s school attendance. Should House Bill 4041 take effect, DHS caseworkers could be limited in their intervention efforts in order to follow the letter of the law. More families will lose much needed assistance and school attendance rates could be negatively impacted.

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Additionally, there may be an acceptable excuse for having a high number of absences related to illness or having a disability. However, a family could become ineligible, lose benefits and not have the opportunity to explain the situation to their caseworker. House Bill 4041 lacks a clear process for appealing a decision by a caseworker to terminate benefits based on attendance requirements.

Over the past four years, a number of new requirements have been put into place for FIP, or cash assistance, recipients. At the same time, caseloads have dropped even though child poverty in Michigan continues to be unacceptably high. Approximately one in four children in Michigan are living in poverty and of the roughly 255,000 children in the state that would qualify for FIP assistance, only 68,000 were participating in 2013. In the meantime, since fiscal year 2011, FIP caseloads have dropped by 55% and are projected to drop even further. The program is already not meeting the need of families in Michigan. Codifying this DHS policy will only contribute to increasing child poverty and those living in extreme poverty.

DHS policy should have the goal of helping families, not driving them into more economic crisis. House Bill 4041, codifying the DHS FIP attendance requirement policy, could act as a hindrance to achieving this.

In summary, the League has the following concerns with the bill:

- Codifying current DHS policy ties the hands of the department.
- Barriers to attending school are not addressed.
- Full family sanction for families with children between 6 and 15 years old is severe.
- Unclear definition of truancy or attendance policy.
- Lack of due process to appeal a decision.
- Child poverty remains unacceptably high.