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Committee on Labor, October 12, 2023 Testimony of Elinor Jordan for House Bill 4932

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 enthusiastically support House 4932 because it would improve outcomes for victims of child labor.

Recent reporting sheds light on the deplorable conditions unaccompanied immigrant children in Michigan and elsewhere face in the workplace. MIRC is honored to represent many immigrant and refugee children. Even before this reporting, we have screened our young clients for abuses and educated them about workplace rights and enforcement mechanisms.

In our experience working with children who labor, the key to their safety lies in addressing the vulnerabilities that led them to work in the first place. These push factors are usually related to severe economic deprivation and lack of access to any public benefits. These children are often part of caring families or community groups who would love to see their children attend school and thrive academically. However, immigrant families lack access to nearly all social safety nets, leaving children vulnerable to labor exploitation when they seek to fill gaps in family income. Our team members and colleagues seeking to investigate labor violations have gotten to know the families of laboring children and have found they often lack any access to even extremely basic necessities such as food and stable housing.

HB 4932 begins to address the root causes of child exploitation and trafficking by providing more significant accountability for employers who prey on these children's vulnerability. Critically, the bills also create avenues for child victims to seek financial recovery that would meet victims' immediate needs. Based on our experience, this type of direct award would be the most effective mechanism to remediate child labor abuses and lower the probability that the child will turn to another employer where they may also be exploited. The ability to sue an employer for violations would further empower youth to receive more comprehensive relief to address their needs and build more lasting recovery for them and their families.

We are also encouraged to see protections that would guard against retaliation by employers against those who report or cooperate with investigations. It is difficult to overstate the fear that our team members see when assisting workers across the state in terms of having their jobs or those of their family or community members at risk. This pervasive dread of retaliation makes it nearly impossible for workers—adults and children alike—to participate in investigations. These bills would disrupt that dynamic and require accountability for employers who take retaliatory action. When our team members advise workers, we will be more easily able to encourage them to participate in enforcement if these anti-retaliation provisions are in place.

Victims of child labor violations deserve the empowerment that this bill package offers them. We are grateful to the sponsors for their commitment to addressing the underlying causes of these violations and hope to continue working together to end child exploitation. We would welcome any questions from the committee on these topics.