



Testimony on Senate Bill 4
Committee on Seniors, Families, and Children
January 30, 2019

Catholic Charities of St. Louis is a federation of eight independent agencies and one of the largest providers of social services in the state. We serve people in St. Louis City and County, as well as nine surrounding counties and last year, more than 110,000 people benefitted from the services we provide. More than 76% of our clients live at or below the federal poverty level, and many of them rely on safety net programs like SNAP as they work to improve their lives.

Poor health is already a challenge for many of our clients and in fact, our eight agency directors collectively report that poor health is the single biggest obstacle their clients face. We know that poor health is a concern not just for our clients but for low-income people across the state: a 2015 study by the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, one of three federally-funded poverty centers in the United States, ranked Missouri 40 out of 51 states and the District of Columbia on measures of health and, particularly, socioeconomic health disparities. The United Health Foundation ranks Missouri 38 out of 50 on 33 measures of health and on measures of the prevalence of poor mental health and access to care, Mental Health America ranked Missouri 30 out of 50. Creating a situation in which more people in Missouri are hungry, including potentially tens of thousands of children, will further erode health in our state and is surely counterproductive.

We are also concerned that those of us who have not spent meaningful time with people who live in poverty, who have not sat with them while they describe the daily challenges they confront, challenges both big and small and which most of us can't imagine on our own, underestimate the hardship which the documentation associated with a work tracking requirement will create. We fear that many families will lose access to SNAP, not because they aren't honoring the requirements but because they are unable to routinely and appropriately demonstrate their compliance or the basis for an exemption.

Finally, we strongly object to that aspect of the bill which would deny food assistance to an entire household, including children, as a result of the noncompliance of the head of household, and we note that even withholding assistance only to the noncompliant head of household serves to diminish what is available to the entire household. And finally, as a faith-based organization regarding family as the central social institution, we cannot support legislation which incentivizes family separation by allowing SNAP eligibility to be reinstated following removal from the family of the head of that household.

Catholic Charities of St. Louis is committed to connecting people to work, something our agencies do every day, and we support efforts to encourage work and make it feasible. But we respectfully ask that this committee oppose Senate Bill 4 as punitive and ineffective legislation which carries great risks to the health and well-being of vulnerable people and particularly, Missouri's children.