

Called to be Faithful

Michigan Catholic Conference's public policy
advocacy before the 102nd Michigan Legislature



**MICHIGAN
CATHOLIC**
CONFERENCE

Called to be Faithful

Michigan Catholic Conference's public policy
advocacy before the 102nd Michigan Legislature

Contents

Letter of Introduction	2
By the Numbers	3
MCC engagement before the 102 nd Legislature	
Promoting a Culture of Life	5
A major push to end most health and safety limits on abortion in Michigan was significantly curtailed through MCC advocacy	
Helping Families Make Ends Meet	15
Substantial tax cut for families approved after years of MCC advocacy	
Defending the Vulnerable	19
MCC makes spirited push to secure dignity for immigrants	
Ensuring Quality Education Options for All	25
MCC helped nonpublic schools access key services for students	
A Voice for the Church and Its Ministries	31
Preserving First Amendment protections the focus of MCC advocacy	
Dedicated to Protecting Children	37
MCC championed abuse prevention policies in medical settings	
Connect with Us	40

“God has not called me to be successful; He has called me to be faithful.”

St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Friends,

Mother Teresa’s reflection on faithfulness is pertinent not only to individuals in their walk with God, but also to MCC in its public policy advocacy before the Legislature. Many who participate in politics see it as a zero-sum game of winners and losers. Yet the Church’s interest in the political sphere runs deeper than the passing successes and failures of any given day or legislative session.

For MCC to be faithful is to remain dedicated to its mission to advocate for human dignity and the common good in accordance with the Church and the wisdom of Her social teachings. The following pages within this report demonstrate the tireless efforts of MCC staff to be faithful to its mission in the most recent legislative session, often in the face of challenging circumstances.

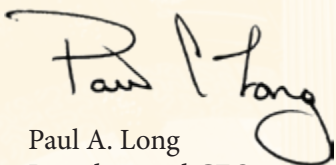
There were several notable successes this past session that MCC had a hand in bringing to fruition. MCC was a critical player in helping secure the largest-ever increase to a state tax credit that has been proven to defeat poverty and help families. New laws to better protect children against abuse in medical settings were enacted after five years of continuous MCC advocacy. MCC also offered support for passage of the most significant gun safety reforms—intended to better protect life—that Michigan has seen in years.

Yet advocating for human life and the common good within a secularized culture comes with its challenges. In the aftermath of the voters’ 2022 approval of a constitutional right to abortion, MCC fought against legislative efforts to repeal long-standing pro-life policies. MCC stood for First Amendment-protected conscience rights and the Church’s ability to freely serve the poor as the Legislature took up expanding the state’s civil rights statute. And MCC spoke in support of vulnerable women who would be impacted by legislation creating a paid surrogacy industry in Michigan.

Unfortunately, MCC did not always succeed in these efforts. However, Mother Teresa’s quote reminds us that God calls us to faithfulness. While there is still much to celebrate—both in the passage of good policy and in blocking bad policy—our hope is that this end-of-session legislative report illustrates MCC’s fidelity to championing the Church’s values in the public policy arena.

My esteemed predecessor, Sister Monica Kostielney, R.S.M., put it well: **“Our advocacy voice is sometimes welcomed and other times rejected. Nevertheless, we maintain an unwavering commitment to the principles of Catholic social teaching as we seek to shape a more just world.”**

Yours in Christ,



Paul A. Long
President and CEO
Michigan Catholic Conference



Paul A. Long
President and CEO
Michigan Catholic
Conference

By the Numbers

MCC engagement before the 102nd Legislature

Public Policy Advocacy

1,235

Bills monitored
by MCC staff

204

Bills MCC
took a
position on

28

Instances MCC staff
offered testimony
on legislation

Communications Initiatives

174,000

Copies across five editions
of *Focus* shipped to Catholic
entities and public officials

77

Lansing Update
emails sent to
CAN members

31

News releases issued
to state and national
media outlets

19

Word from Lansing
columns distributed to
Catholic media outlets

Grassroots Activation

27,714

Messages sent to lawmakers
as a result of MCC Action
Alert campaigns

9,176

Net growth in Catholic
Advocacy Network
membership

9

Action Alert campaigns
initiated to engage
grassroots Catholics

**THE NATURAL
CHOICE
IS LIFE!**



Keep the



LOVE



Promoting a Culture of Life

A major push to end most health and safety limits on abortion in Michigan was significantly curtailed through MCC advocacy

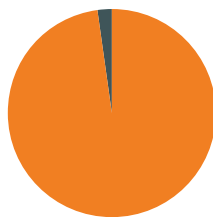
MCC embarked on an uphill campaign to oppose the so-called Reproductive Health Act (RHA), which was backed by a pro-abortion legislative majority and Governor seeking to deregulate much of the abortion industry, and succeeded in preserving reasonable limits on abortion in state law.

As introduced, the RHA¹ sought to require Michigan taxpayers to fund abortions through Medicaid, eliminate a 24-hour informed consent period to provide women information about the procedure and possible complications, and remove the requirement to screen women for signs of coercion prior to an abortion.

However, none of those policies made it into the final bills, with a small block of Democratic lawmakers unwilling to support their repeal and one even publicly expressing her opposition.

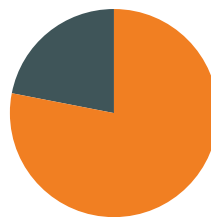
The Reproductive Health Act would remove licensing and inspection requirements on abortion clinics and the 24-hour waiting period to provide women informed consent about abortion, two policies that Michigan voters across the board still strongly support.

“Do you support a regulation that requires abortion facilities be licensed and inspected by the state for health and safety reasons?”



95% support
2% oppose

“Do you support a regulation that requires a 24-hour waiting period to allow for informed consent allowing a doctor to provide information on the abortion procedure, and common risks before a woman receives an abortion?”



72% support
20% oppose

Aided by polling commissioned by MCC months in advance of the bills' debut, MCC developed messaging around the health and safety of women who would be impacted by repealing abortion regulations and arranged to have the messaging delivered by credible voices to lawmakers and their constituents.

1. House Bills 4949, 4951, 4953–4956 and Senate Bills 474, 476 and 477, all from 2023, all signed into law

Polling Indicates Wide Voter Support for Restrictions on Abortion

Data Show Majority of Pro-Choice and Pro-3 Voters Support Parental Consent, Safety Standards

Michigan voters support long-standing regulations on abortion.

24-Hour Waiting Periods

"Do you support or oppose a regulation that requires a 24-hour waiting period to allow for informed consent before a woman receives an abortion?"



63%
total support
25% total oppose

Parental Consent

"Do you support or oppose requiring parents to consent to their minor-age child having an abortion?"



67%
total support
26% total oppose

Health and Safety Standards

"Do you support or oppose a regulation that requires that abortion facilities be licensed and inspected by the state for health and safety reasons?"



90%
total support
4% total oppose

(Lansing, Mich.) — The legislative majority and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer would be going against the will of Michigan voters — and for the Governor, her own stated position — if legislation advances to remove the requirement that parents give consent for their children to undergo abortion, according to polling data released today by Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC).

MCC activated its grassroots network to oppose the legislation, which resulted in more than 6,000 messages sent to lawmakers. MCC led coordination of legislative committee testimony, strategically arranging for medical professionals to share with lawmakers the health harms associated with the bills.



Action Needed: Stop the deregulation of abortion in Michigan. Tell lawmakers to reject the Reproductive Health Act

Michigan Catholic Conference Action Alert, September 13, 2023



“Why is [the law requiring informed consent before an abortion] needed? ... She didn’t know that could happen.”

Dr. Catherine Stark, a board-certified OB-GYN, who testified against the RHA and told a story about a woman who underwent emergency surgery at a hospital after the woman was severely injured as a result of a complicated abortion at a clinic.

As part of its media strategy, MCC facilitated three op-eds by experts and successfully placed all three in major statewide news publications. MCC also issued multiple press statements and conducted media interviews with secular and Catholic press throughout the legislative process.

Monticello: Abortion bills remove critical protections

If you listen to supporters of the “Reproductive Health Act,” a package of bills that recently passed a Michigan House committee, you may believe that legislators are simply eliminating “medically unnecessary regulations” on the practice of abortion.

Michelle Monticello,
The Detroit News Opinion,
September 30, 2023

After Appalling RHA Legislation Emerges from Committee, Catholic Conference Calls for Greater Respect for Women’s Health and Safety

MCC Calls on House and Senate Members to
Oppose Deregulation of Abortion Industry



(Lansing, Mich.) — Michigan Catholic Conference is calling on the consciences of members of the House of Representatives and state Senate to oppose appalling legislation passed by the House Health Policy Committee this morning that overturns widely-supported limitations on abortion and policies that require accountability and transparency over Michigan abortion facilities.

Michigan Catholic Conference News Release,
September 20, 2023

Loosening abortion regulations is dangerous for Michigan women

As a medical professional, I believe—as I’m sure many people do—that patients should expect the medical facilities they visit to be sanitary and be subject to state inspections and licensing to ensure they are clean and safe.

Dr. Catherine Stark, *Bridge Michigan* Opinion, September 20, 2023

Polo: Abortion bills threaten women's safety

If Michigan residents were asked to recall what convinced them to vote for Proposal 3 last fall, many would say it was to protect the legality of abortion. That was, after all, the main campaign message for abortion supporters who pushed the constitutional amendment.

Christen Polo, *The Detroit News Opinion*, October 25, 2023

Catholic Conference Applauds Pro-Life Efforts Against RHA Bills

MCC Calls on Lawmakers to Support Policies that Protect and Serve Women and Children



(Lansing, Mich.) — “Removing state oversight of health and safety standards at abortion facilities only serves the interests of an industry all-consumed with expanding its abortion business in our state,” Michigan Catholic Conference policy advocate Rebecca Mastee, J.D., stated in response to Governor Whitmer signing into law today most of the bills within a scaled-back version of the pro-abortion Reproductive Health Act (RHA).

Michigan Catholic Conference News Release, November 21, 2023

Unfortunately, portions of the RHA package did become law, including repeal of the late-term partial-birth abortion procedure, overturning state law protecting people from paying for others' elective abortions with their health plan premiums, and removal of reporting requirements for abortion clinics, including for instances of complications.

Despite the Legislature's failure to repeal certain regulations, abortion supporters turned to the courts to overturn the 24-hour waiting period and the ban on Medicaid-funded abortions. The final outcome of those suits is pending as of this publication; however, a state judge has temporarily halted enforcement of laws requiring the waiting period, informed consent standards, and the requirement that only licensed physicians perform abortions.

Other highlights of MCC promoting a culture of life included:

Promotion and planning of the first-ever Michigan March for Life, a pro-life demonstration planned at the state Capitol one year after the passage of the Proposal 3 abortion proposal. Working with staff from the Michigan dioceses, MCC helped turn out thousands of Catholics from across the state to provide a peaceful witness to the dignity of human life and for protection of the unborn.

Photos: Thousands of Catholics and other supporters of protecting human life turned out to peacefully demonstrate at the first-ever Michigan March for Life held on the one-year anniversary of the passage of Proposal 3.





Instrumental advocacy for the continued state funding of grants for nonprofit agencies that distribute diapers free of charge, including an increase from \$4 million to \$6.4 million in the budget for Fiscal Year 2025.² As a result of the availability of grant funding, Catholic Charities of West Michigan was able to begin a mobile diaper distribution program in its region to reach more mothers in need.

Support for significant gun safety legislation in the interest of protecting innocent life, particularly children. The legislation supported by MCC that was signed into law strengthened gun background checks, required safe storage of guns in homes, and allowed for temporary confiscation of firearms from individuals who could hurt themselves or others.³ MCC educated the lay faithful in Michigan on the Catholic response to gun violence by publishing a comprehensive print and digital edition of its *Focus* publication, which was awarded best web and print package in the 2024 Catholic Media Awards and recognized for excellence by the local chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. MCC also offered support for legislation⁴ promoting the safe storage law to parents of schoolchildren.

Standing against the legislative majority's extreme abortion agenda by opposing legislation that removed protections for women against dangerous abortion practices,⁵ as well as another bill that mandated abortion benefits for employers that provide coverage for pregnancy or childbirth.⁶ In issuing press statements against these bills that did unfortunately pass, MCC called on policymakers to pursue legislation that seeks to address the root causes of abortion, rather than merely expand access to the practice of killing children.

Defending the unborn in opposing legislation that would revise state regulations regarding patient advocate designations,⁷ which MCC observed could allow a woman to have her patient advocate designation stipulate that life-sustaining treatment is not desired even if she is pregnant, which could lead to tragic scenarios that result in the death of both mother and baby.

2. Senate Bill 747 of 2024, signed into law.
3. House Bills 4138, 4142, 4146–4148 and Senate Bills 79–83, all of 2023, all signed into law.
4. House Bills 5450–5451 of 2024, signed into law.
5. House Bills 4006 and 4032 and Senate Bill 2, all of 2023, all signed into law.
6. Senate Bill 147 of 2023, signed into law.
7. Senate Bill 822 of 2024.

Right: MCC's *Focus* publication featured the story of a Catholic family who had two members survive school shootings in Michigan and how that prompted them to advocate for gun safety reforms through their parish.

Enough With Ever-Expanding Abortion Policy. Let's Make It So Women Don't Need It.



Abortion is not the same as childbirth. To most, that may seem obvious.

The Word from Lansing, May 18, 2023



From left to right: Pat Damer and his daughters Sophia, an Oxford High School senior; Isabella, a Michigan State University junior; Mia, an Oxford freshman; and his wife Jeanne in front of Oxford High School. Sophia survived the Oxford shooting and Isabella survived the MSU shooting. Photo credit Valaurian Waller.

A CATHOLIC RESPONSE TO GUN VIOLENCE

Like anyone, Pat Damer never thought it could happen to him or his family. But it did. Twice.

His daughter was at Oxford High School the day of the 2021 shooting that claimed the lives of four students and injured seven people. Her class barricaded themselves and armed themselves with scissors and textbooks. She survived.

A year later, another of Pat's daughters was on campus at Michigan State University the night when a gunman

walked into two buildings and killed three students and injured five others. She also survived.

Those experiences changed Pat.

"I think it was the direct impact to family and friends—and specifically my daughters—that drew me more into the issue" of gun violence, Damer said, who said he had a "healthy respect" for guns growing up. He now serves on his parish's peace and justice committee working to educate Catholics on gun violence.

"The Church can be part of the solution to gun violence, by being the Church—the mission is to teach and preach the Gospel and live it out," he said. "I think the Church ... can and needs to play a vital role in this discussion."

In recent months, the Michigan Legislature has approved bills to implement gun safety reforms and curb gun violence. Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC) testified in support of the bills, in continuity with positions taken by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and other state Catholic conferences in supporting gun safety reforms to protect human life and address violence in society.

While there are many factors that influence gun violence, gun regulation is still part of the conversation. Acknowledging that gun policies alone will not solve every problem, this edition of **focus** will examine gun safety policies and why they are part of the Catholic response to gun violence.



Helping Families Make Ends Meet

Substantial tax cut for families approved after years of MCC advocacy

Lower income working families in Michigan are keeping more of what they earn and are better positioned to support themselves, thanks to MCC advocacy for legislation signed into law that increased the state's Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to 30% of the federal credit, up from 6%.⁸

The EITC helps the working poor through the payout of a tax credit that individuals often use to pay for immediate needs like groceries, utility bills, and auto repairs. It's a policy that has proven effective in addressing poverty and helped families create better lives for themselves.

MCC joined with more than 230 advocacy groups across the state to encourage lawmakers to boost the state credit. To help advance the issue, MCC testified in legislative committees, issued multiple press statements, and called on grassroots Catholics to contact their lawmakers.



Tom Hickson, vice president for public policy and advocacy for MCC (far right), appears at the bill signing for the increased Earned Income Tax Credit along with other coalition partners.

8. House Bill 4001 of 2023, signed into law.

“Since the early 2000s MCC has led the efforts for both the creation and protection of the EITC.”

Paul Long, president and CEO of MCC, in a news release issued January 23, 2023

To continue building on the EITC model of providing direct support for families, MCC joined efforts to promote the adoption of a new Working Parents Tax Credit (WPTC), which would provide additional support for working, lower-income families with younger children.

MCC was named to a statewide steering committee to advocate for the policy, and shared the benefits of the WPTC with lawmakers, including how it would help more parents stay in the workforce and afford childcare. MCC will continue advocacy for adoption of the WPTC in the next session.

More MCC advocacy for families and the poor included:

Amplifying the message that supporting families will help Michigan’s population grow. MCC shared with a statewide commission charged with developing a population growth strategy that families are the building block of society. MCC sent a letter expressing this viewpoint to the commission as a way to inject the Catholic perspective on families into an ongoing conversation among policymakers about growing Michigan’s population, and to provide tangible policy solutions that would support families. MCC supported this advocacy through a social media campaign and statements to the press, one of which was recognized by the Catholic Media Association for best press release of 2024.

Monitoring of the state budget process to ensure programs to help the poor and vulnerable continue to receive funding, including heating assistance for low-income families and support for homeless shelters.

To help families and the poor, MCC also supported legislation that:

- Eases access to food by removing a required asset test to qualify for receiving food stamps.⁹
- Extends an automatic poverty exemption on local property taxes for individuals who are struggling financially.¹⁰
- Encourages giving to homeless shelters, food banks or food kitchens.¹¹
- Improves access to clean drinking water for those who struggle to pay their water bills.¹²
- Allows residential—especially low-income—individuals to benefit from participation in renewable energy by cultivating the creation of community-based solar energy projects.¹³

9. Senate Bill 35 of 2023, signed into law.

10. Senate Bill 55 of 2023, signed into law.

11. Senate Bill 128 of 2023.

12. Senate Bills 549–554 of 2023 and House Bills 5088–5093 of 2023.

13. House Bill 4464 of 2023.

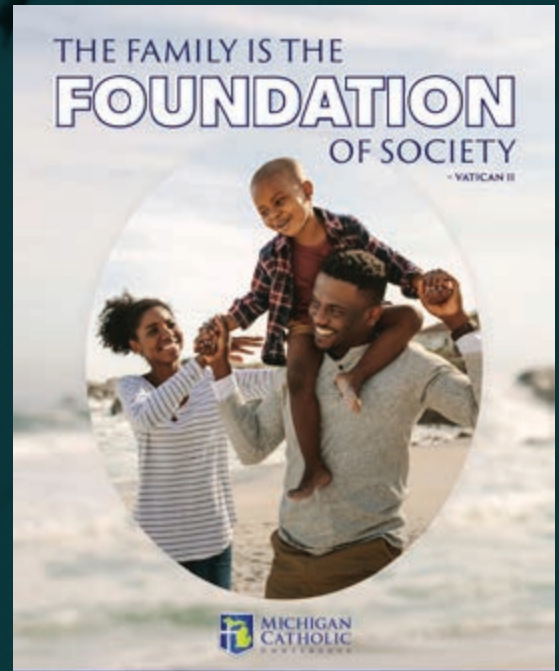
MCC Urges Governor's Population Council to Focus on Family Growth and Support

Policies that support low-income families and encourage couples to have children should be among Council's recommendations



(Lansing, Mich.) — To grow Michigan's stagnant population, policymakers should view proposed solutions through the lens of supporting family life by making it easier to have and raise children in this state, according to a letter from Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC) to the Governor's council tasked with recommending policy goals to grow Michigan's population.

Michigan Catholic Conference News Release,
November 28, 2023



Population Growth Policies Should be Family Growth Policies

Our state is not growing in population, and that is a problem. Fewer people mean fewer funds for public services that benefit everyone. Fewer people also mean a smaller workforce. We have already seen that post-COVID.

The Word from Lansing, December 11, 2023

**Restore
DRIVERS'
LICENSES FOR
IMMIGRANTS**



Defending the Vulnerable

MCC makes spirited push to secure dignity for immigrants

Immigrants and refugees are among the most vulnerable members of society. For many of them, “not only is their dignity denied in their home countries, but also their lives are put at risk because they no longer have the means to start a family, to work, or to feed themselves.”¹⁴

This is particularly true for the 100,000 undocumented individuals in Michigan, who live in a state where driving is essential for daily living and yet have lacked the legal ability to drive since 2008. Over the course of five legislative sessions, MCC has advocated for passage of legislation allowing undocumented individuals to apply for Michigan driver’s licenses or state identification for the purpose of helping people live their daily lives and transport themselves to work, the grocery store, the doctor’s office, and their kids to school and church.



Tom Hickson, vice president for public policy and advocacy, was invited to speak alongside key lawmakers and other advocates who are encouraging passage of legislation to allow undocumented Michiganders the opportunity to apply for and receive driver’s licenses so they can more easily conduct their daily lives.

14. *Dignitas Infinita*, No. 40.



So, we are happy to be here in Michigan. Now, we are part of the community here in Ann Arbor, and I feel good; I feel at home.

In addition to keeping in contact with bill sponsors and other key lawmakers, MCC spoke in favor of the Drive SAFE bills¹⁵ at multiple press conferences and assisted the Catholic-affiliated Strangers No Longer group with organizing two legislative advocacy days at the Capitol, which involved bringing hundreds of advocates to Lansing to meet with their representatives.

To help demonstrate the human impact of the proposed policy, MCC created and released a video that shared the story of Laura, who spoke about living in Michigan for nearly 20 years but without identification and how that affects her daily life. MCC linked to the video in a news release and on social media to reiterate support for the legislation in the final days of lame duck session.

Despite the efforts from MCC and countless other individuals, the Legislature did not pass the bill, but this policy will remain a top priority for MCC going forward when it comes to advocating for our immigrant brothers and sisters.

Other highlights of MCC defending the vulnerable this session include:

Presenting concerns regarding the exploitation of vulnerable women who choose to become surrogates by opposing legislation allowing paid surrogacy contracts in Michigan. MCC shared with lawmakers that most of the world considers paid surrogacy contracts a human rights violation and provided several examples. MCC's advocacy focused on the implications for vulnerable surrogate women and was grounded in the Catholic perspective that surrogacy undermines the dignity of motherhood and the rights of children. MCC pushed for amendments to improve protections for women in the legislation, but no changes were made to the bills that were ultimately signed into law.¹⁶



Watch Laura's testimony about what it's like living in Michigan without a driver's license: cthl.cc/nr2f8

Rebecca Mastee, policy advocate for MCC, testifies against legislation that would legalize surrogacy contracts in Michigan during the House Judiciary Committee.

15. House Bills 4410–4412 of 2023 and Senate Bills 265–267 of 2023.

16. House Bills 5207–5215 of 2023, signed into law.

Continued efforts to set limits on the payday lending industry, which preys upon vulnerable, lower-income Michiganders by trapping individuals into spiraling debt. MCC testified in support of legislation signed into law requiring the state to publish data on payday lenders to document their impact on Michiganders,¹⁷ and provided testimony, grassroots activation, and social media promotion in support of legislation to cap payday lending interest rates to limit the debt incurred by individuals.¹⁸



Tom Hickson, MCC vice president for public policy and advocacy, testifies for legislation to cap payday loan rates and shows the Senate committee a document listing alternative low-interest lending options for people in need. Behind him is Lorry Brown, managing attorney of the Michigan Poverty Law Program.

MCC supported other legislation to protect the vulnerable that included:

- Preventing mobile home park owners from engaging in unjust practices against their residents, such as unreasonable rent increases or arbitrary fees.¹⁹
- Better protections for victims of human trafficking from unjust prosecution.²⁰
- Helping pregnant women and children immigrants access healthcare sooner by supporting legislation to waive the five-year waiting period imposed on those who would otherwise qualify for Medicaid.²¹
- Improving access to driver's licenses and a better quality of life for vulnerable Michiganders by supporting legislation to cancel fees that inhibit access to licenses,²² ending a punitive waiting period to apply for a license,²³ and allowing the state to apply for a driver's license for prisoners returning to society.²⁴

17. House Bill 4343 of 2023, signed into law.

18. Senate Bill 632 of 2023.

19. Senate Bills 486–490 of 2023.

20. House Bills 5836–5842 of 2024.

21. House Bill 4740 of 2023.

22. Senate Bill 706 of 2024, signed into law.

23. House Bill 5103 of 2023, signed into law.

24. House Bills 4191–4194 of 2023.

- Bolstering the rights of and protections for crime victims.²⁵
- Holding accountable those who seek to exploit vulnerable adults.²⁶
- Allowing vulnerable adults to obtain personal protective orders against others who have harmed or could harm them.²⁷



From left, front row: Allie Hayes, whose story inspired the vulnerable adults legislation; and her sister Eileen Hayes. In the back row, from left: Paul Stankewitz, policy advocate for MCC; Mark and Dawn Hayes, parents of Allie; and Matt Dargay, legislative aide to bill sponsor Rep. Sharon MacDonell.

- A comprehensive overhaul of the state’s juvenile justice system intended to secure restorative justice for juvenile offenders and their families, including legislation to set standards for the provision of legal services for indigent juvenile offenders.²⁸
- Incentivizing participation in rehabilitation to reduce the likelihood that former prisoners return to prison by establishing “productivity credits,” toward deducting time off their sentences.²⁹

25. House Bills 4420–4423 of 2023, signed into law.

26. House Bills 4320 and 4387 of 2023, signed into law.

27. Senate Bills 922–925 of 2024, vetoed by governor.

28. List of bills MCC supported can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

29. House Bills 4450–4453 of 2023.



Ensuring Quality Education Options for All

MCC helped nonpublic schools access key services for students

The Church recognizes parents are the primary educators of their children and have the right to direct their children's education as they choose. As such, the state should promote and make available quality education choices.

MCC seeks to ensure state policies and funding are made available to the more than 100,000 nonpublic school students in Michigan so that parents have access to quality education opportunities across all schools.

This past session, MCC successfully advocated for funding in the state budget to provide Catholic and other nonpublic schools:

- Dual enrollment for students to earn college credits.
- Opportunities to allow students to participate in robotics and STEM-focused competitions.
- Reimbursement for complying with state-mandated health and safety regulations.



Paul Stankewitz, policy advocate for MCC, in Washington, D.C. with Catholic school leaders from the Archdiocese of Detroit and the Diocese of Grand Rapids.

Opposite page: Mr. Stankewitz addressing nonpublic school leaders ahead of visits with lawmakers to advocate for policies benefiting nonpublic schools, as part of the annual policy day at the Capitol organized by MCC and the Michigan Association of Nonpublic Schools.

In addition to direct advocacy with lawmakers alongside the Michigan Association of Nonpublic Schools, MCC helped coordinate two annual legislative advocacy days for nonpublic school leaders to visit Lansing and meet with lawmakers, and participated in promoting National School Choice Week at the Capitol.



Students, educators and other supporters of education choice gather at the Capitol each year to mark National School Choice Week, an event that MCC co-sponsors.

MCC also successfully advocated for nonpublic schools to be included in legislation that:

- Provides safer drinking water in schools.³⁰
- Updates cardiac emergency preparedness standards.³¹

MCC fights to preserve school safety funding for nonpublic schools

When the Governor released her budget recommendations for 2025, millions in school safety and mental health funding for nonpublic schools were proposed for removal. MCC and MANS strategically focused on the preservation of these safety funds as the top budget advocacy item throughout the legislative appropriations process.

MCC issued an action alert to its network and to the MANS network of nonpublic school educators, urging them to contact their lawmakers, resulting in more than 7,000 messages sent. The final budget did preserve safety funding for nonpublic schools—but at a dramatically reduced rate.

Advocacy continued for more safety funding all the way through the last day of session and will continue to work on the issue in upcoming budget cycles. MCC worked to amplify the issue throughout the year with a published column sent to Catholic media and frequent social media and email updates to grassroots activists.

30. House Bills 4341–4342 of 2023, signed into law.

31. House Bills 5527–5528 of 2024, signed into law.

Back in the Budget: Nonpublic School Funding Restored in Latest House Bill

Grassroots Advocacy Helps Restore
Nonpublic School Funding in
House Budget



School safety funding for nonpublic schools is back in the state budget under a re-vamped education spending plan that the House Appropriations Committee approved and sent to the House floor this week.

Lansing Update, May 3, 2024

Catholics, Tell Your Lawmakers to Support More Safety Funding for Nonpublic Schools



Every child, regardless of where he or she attends school, should feel safe in class. Even in this divided world, most would agree on promoting school safety for all children.

The Word from Lansing, December 6, 2024

Nonpublic Schools See Cuts to Safety Funding Under New State Education Budget

Students Eligible for Healthy Meals in High Poverty Areas Also Overlooked in Budget

(Lansing, Mich.) — Michigan Catholic Conference is sharing its concerns about reduced and lack of state funding to nonpublic schools and students across the state in the areas of school safety and lunch programs as Governor Whitmer today signed into law the 2024-2025 state education budget.

Michigan Catholic Conference News Release, July 23, 2024

Other highlights of MCC’s advocacy for quality education options:

Persistent advocacy for including nonpublic school students in the state’s expanded meal program, which was intended to ensure every child has access to a free meal at school, regardless of family income. Many nonpublic schools participate in the federal breakfast and lunch program to feed low-income students, but the state’s expansion of the program did not include nonpublic students. MCC pressed lawmakers to include nonpublic schools that would have otherwise qualified for the expanded meal access in budget discussions in both 2023 and 2024, and testified for the inclusion of nonpublic schools in legislation that would have codified the new program in state law.³² MCC will continue working to help nonpublic schools access this program.



MCC policy advocate Paul Stankewitz, right, and Brian Broderick, executive director for the Michigan Association for Nonpublic Schools, testified before the Senate Education Committee to urge lawmakers to include nonpublic schools in a free school meals for kids program.

Right: This document was used to present the case to lawmakers for why nonpublic schools should be included in funding for the universal meal program, which was designed to allow all students—regardless of income—to access free meals at school.

Support for a wide-ranging package to improve school safety, particularly through more proactive efforts to address mental health and address concerning behaviors among students.³³

Backing of bipartisan bills to ensure reading problems in children are detected and addressed.³⁴

Advocacy against legislation that would impede the potential for expanded education choice by prohibiting the sale of unused or abandoned public school buildings to charter or nonpublic schools.³⁵

32. Senate Bill 500 of 2023.

33. House Bills 4095–4096 of 2023, House Bills 5549, 5659–5660 of 2024, signed into law.

34. Senate Bills 567–568 of 2023.

35. House Bill 5025 of 2023.

Include nonpublic school students in Michigan's K-12 meal program

The Situation

The 2023–2024 School Aid Budget contains \$160 million to expand a federal school meal program for every public school student who attends a school participating in the program, regardless of the student's family income.

The program benefits public school students who come from wealthy families in addition to students from low-income families.

The policy is intended to ensure all students are fed during the school day and to eliminate the stigma against those receiving food assistance.

The Problem

Students attending nonpublic schools that participate in the federal meal program were not included in the expanded program to feed every student.

According to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), there are approximately 4,200 students attending nonpublic schools in Michigan who could benefit from the additional assistance but were not included. These students would be eligible for the additional assistance but for their attendance at a nonpublic school.

Students left out of the meal program include those who attend nonpublic schools in cities that have among the highest poverty rates in the state, such as Flint, Saginaw, and Jackson.

The Solution

MDE has estimated it could cost approximately \$1.6 million to include the nonpublic school students excluded from the meal program, which represents 1% of the \$160 million already being spent on the program.

Because this is a nutrition policy rather than an education program, allocating state dollars to feed low-income children in the state does not violate constitutional provisions.

The state is permitted to use General Fund dollars to include nonpublic school students in the meal program the same way that the state

currently provides General Fund dollars to nonpublic schools for:

- School safety improvements
- Mental health services
- Reimbursement for health and safety mandates
- Safe drinking water

If providing meals to every student at school regardless of family income is the goal, any public policy associated with that goal should treat all kids the same. **Support the inclusion of nonpublic school students in the state's K-12 meal program.**



By the Numbers: Nonpublic Schools and Students in Michigan

113,842

Number of students attending nonpublic schools in Michigan for the 2024 school year. Students enrolled in nonpublic schools represent some **8 percent** of total K-12 school age children in the state.

524

Number of nonpublic schools educating Michigan children for the 2024 school year.

Source: Michigan Department of Education



A Voice for the Church and Its Ministries

Preserving First Amendment protections the focus of MCC advocacy

Allowing Catholic schools and charities to operate according to the Catholic faith was at the heart of MCC's advocacy for religious liberty protections in legislation that expanded the state's civil rights law.

MCC conducted and presented research to lawmakers that showed the proposal to add sexual orientation and "gender identity and expression" to Michigan's prohibited forms of discrimination would be the first and only expansion in the country without religious liberty protections included alongside the expansion.

MCC argued additional language was needed to guard the First Amendment-protected beliefs of Catholic entities and other faith traditions that marriage is between one man and one woman, and that men and women are biologically different. Without it, MCC warned that religious entities would be dragged into costly litigation to defend their First Amendment rights, such as in hiring decisions.



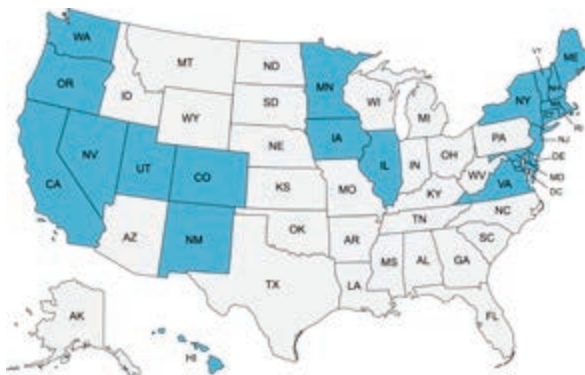
**MICHIGAN
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE**

Religious Protections in State Civil Rights Laws

Every state that has adopted new protected classes in its state civil rights law also has religious liberty protections.

In these 22 states and the District of Columbia, religious protections cover employment, housing, and public accommodation. All 22 states and D.C. include at least employment-related religious protections.

These states with religious protections in state civil rights laws include California, New York, Massachusetts, Oregon, Washington, and Illinois, as well as states like Utah and Iowa.



MCC conducted and presented this research to lawmakers to make the case for including religious protections in the proposed expansion of the state's civil rights law.

To make its case, MCC testified before the Legislature, spurred grassroots Catholics to send more than 8,000 messages to lawmakers, and joined with a Muslim advocacy group to publish a joint op-ed in *The Detroit News* about shared concerns regarding the legislation.

Catholic Conference Urges Religious Protections as Senate Committee Amends ELCRA

Every State That Has Amended Anti-Discrimination Law Has Included Religious Protections



(Lansing, Mich.) — Earlier this afternoon the Senate Civil Rights, Judiciary and Public Safety Committee passed legislation that would add sexual orientation, gender identity and expression to the list of protected classes in Michigan’s civil rights law, the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act.

Michigan Catholic Conference
News Release, February 9, 2023

Senate Fails to Include Religious Protections in Changes to Civil Rights Law



(Lansing, Mich.) — The Michigan Senate today voted 23-15 to pass legislation that adds new categories to the state’s civil rights law without an amendment that protects religious organizations from discrimination. For weeks Michigan Catholic Conference and other faith-based organizations have urged Senate members to protect religious organizations from discrimination claims and litigation when adding sexual orientation, gender identity and expression to the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act.

Michigan Catholic Conference
News Release, March 1, 2023

“MCC staff deployed essentially every tool in our advocacy toolbox to fight for the rights of schools, charities, and organizations who wish to serve others in the public square according to the teachings of their faith.”

Paul Long, president and CEO of MCC

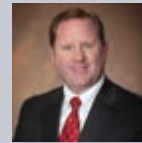
Michigan House Votes to Allow Discrimination Against Religious Communities

Faith-Based Organizations Believing in Gender Differences and Traditional Marriage Likely to be Targeted



(Lansing, Mich.) — The Michigan House of Representatives voted today to amend the state’s civil rights act that will likely create a right to target religious organizations for their teachings, beliefs and practices related to traditional marriage and biological gender differences, Michigan Catholic Conference stated after the vote. The legislation, Senate Bill 4 and House Bill 4003, adds “sexual identity, gender identity and expression” to the state’s civil rights act while failing to include protections for religious organizations that provide humanitarian services and assistance to the general public, especially the poor and needy.

Michigan Catholic Conference News Release, March 8, 2023



Paul Long
President & CEO,
Michigan Catholic Conference



Imam Dawud Walid
Executive Director,
Council on American-Islamic
Relations (CAIR) Michigan

Read the full article



“Writing as representatives of Muslim and Catholic communities, we believe elected officials should consider the impact of public policy changes on all Michigan citizens and include protections for religious organizations.”

—“Civil Rights Include Religious Protection,”
joint op-ed published in *The Detroit News*,
Feb. 20, 2023

Against the Odds, MCC Stands Up for Catholics’ Freedom to Serve



As Michigan lawmakers took up a bill to expand the state’s civil rights law to include sexual orientation and gender identity, Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC) took up its own mission: To have the bill amended to protect religious organizations from discrimination for their beliefs in marriage and in biological differences between men and women.

The Word from Lansing, April 25, 2023

Other highlights of MCC serving as a voice for the Church included:

Advocacy against legislation jeopardizing free speech rights for faith-based counselors, spurred by concerns from the state's Catholic Charities agencies that provide counseling services. The legislation sought to ban "conversion therapy"³⁶ but did so in an overly broad fashion by prohibiting "any practice or treatment" that "seeks to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity," which could include talk therapy, with violations punishable by licensing sanctions. Despite MCC advocacy that included legislative testimony, a press statement, and grassroots advocacy, the bills were signed into law. A lawsuit was later filed by Catholic agencies challenging it on First Amendment grounds.³⁷

Catholic Conference Raises Concerns Over Broad Language in Bills Restricting Counselors' Speech

Despite intent, language in bills would open the door for targeting of religious professionals



(Lansing, Mich.) — Two bills recently approved by the Michigan Legislature that restrict speech in counselor-patient settings should be rejected by Gov. Whitmer on the grounds that the language is too broad and goes well beyond its intended purpose, Michigan Catholic Conference (MCC) said today.

Michigan Catholic Conference News Release, July 7, 2023

36. House Bills 4616–4617 of 2023, signed into law.

37. *Catholic Charities v. Whitmer*.

Offering support to legislation signed into law that toughened criminal penalties for individuals who vandalize Church property.³⁸ MCC shared with lawmakers that hundreds of Catholic churches had been attacked across the U.S. since 2020, including several sites in Michigan.

Supporting the adoption services offered by Catholic Charities agencies by opposing legislation that would break the confidentiality promise for parents who choose adoption.³⁹ MCC arranged for a representative of Catholic Charities to share concerns about the bill, and drafted a letter signed by allies outlining issues with the proposed policy, which did not end up becoming law.



Stephanie Busch (left) of Catholic Charities of West Michigan testifies before the Senate Civil Rights, Judiciary, Public Safety Committee. Behind her is Rebecca Mastee, policy advocate for MCC.

Warning lawmakers that legislation intended to protect women’s reproductive health data could end up negatively impacting the work of Catholic Charities agencies that serve pregnant women and new moms.⁴⁰

Opposed legislation creating contraception coverage mandates without religious liberty protections that would force employers with sincerely held religious beliefs to either violate their conscience or cease to provide any prescription drug coverage for their employees.⁴¹

Worked against policies that would create regulatory burdens on the Church as an employer by opposing legislation regarding the state’s worker compensation system⁴² and advocating for changes to the scheduled implementation of mandates regarding employee leave policies.⁴³

38. House Bills 4476–4477 of 2023, signed into law.

39. House Bills 5148–5149 of 2023.

40. Senate Bill 1082 of 2024.

41. Senate Bills 973–974 of 2024 and House Bill 4623 of 2023, signed into law.

42. Senate Bills 1079–1080 of 2024.

43. House Bill 6057 of 2024.



Dedicated to Protecting Children

MCC championed abuse prevention policies in medical settings

After five years of advocacy, MCC-backed legislation to provide proactive protection against abuse for minors in medical settings was passed and signed into law in 2023.

The bills implement reforms aimed at preventing the sexual abuse of minors, including the requirement that the state develop and disseminate age-appropriate information on the prevention of sexual abuse and harassment to all public schools for students in grades 6–12.⁴⁴

MCC's support for child protection policies stems from the Catholic Church's commitment to protecting children and preventing abuse in society in general and especially within the Church.

To educate Catholics, public policymakers, and the general public on the Church's work to create safe environments and improve child protection practices, MCC published a statewide report that detailed Michigan diocesan efforts to implement and enforce the abuse prevention standards instituted by the U.S. bishops in the 2002 *Dallas Charter*.



Tom Hickson (far left), vice president for public policy and advocacy for MCC, was present alongside other advocates at the bill signing to strengthen protections for children against abuse in medical settings.

44. House Bills 4120–4125 and Senate Bills 66–73, all of 2023, signed into law.

The comprehensive digital and print package of *Focus* discussed the three major post-*Charter* reforms—victim assistance services, safe environment training, and new processes for handling abuse allegations—through the stories of dedicated professionals who work in these areas for the seven dioceses in Michigan.

More than 50,000 copies were distributed to parishes and policymakers, and the publication earned awards from both the Catholic Media Association⁴⁵ and Public Relations Society of America.⁴⁶

Right: To educate Catholics, public policymakers, and the general public on the Church's work to create safe environments and improve child protection practices, MCC published a statewide report that detailed Michigan diocesan efforts to implement and enforce the abuse prevention standards instituted by the U.S. bishops in the 2002 *Dallas Charter*.

By the Numbers

230,000

Estimated number of Michigan residents trained on how to recognize and immediately report any sign of abuse or activity that may be harmful to children or others through safe environment programs launched by Catholic dioceses in Michigan.

Diocesan statistics compiled by MCC

Learn more at micatholic.org/protectkids

“The Church of the 21st century is safe for children.”

Dr. Thomas Plante, former vice chair of the National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Youth

Learn more at micatholic.org/protectkids

Other highlights of MCC working to protect children included support of legislation that:

- Require foster children are provided with an education that ensures they meet high school graduation requirements.⁴⁷
- Better help agencies that temporarily care for homeless or runaway youth by giving them more time to acquire parental consent while providing youth with interim services.⁴⁸
- Ends the state's practice of seizing and spending the money tied to foster children and instead setting it aside for their use after leaving state custody.⁴⁹

45. Best Web and Print Package, Third Place, 2024.
46. Excellence in Special Purpose Publications, 2024.
47. House Bills 4676–4678 of 2023, signed into law.
48. House Bills 4085–4086 of 2023.
49. Senate Bill 872 of 2024.



On Mission to Protect and Heal

The Catholic Church in Michigan is staying faithful to the Bishops' pledge to protect children

The journey to healing has been a long one for Kathleen Damman, who was abused by a Catholic priest at a young age. It was years later that she first told her family, and decades after that when she came forward with her report. Along the way, she's had to work through anger, bitterness, and grief.

Yet it is a journey she encourages others to take.

"Healing and hope are possible, forgiveness is possible, and that freedom is possible, and they're worth fighting for, and there are people here who are willing to walk with them on their journey," Damman said in a video testimony she shared with the Diocese of Lansing.

Damman is someone willing to walk with survivors of abuse: For years she has served as a leader of healing retreats for abuse survivors that the Diocese of Lansing has conducted since the early 2000s.

"Sharing my story and being a support for them also was in a lot of ways part of my healing journey," she said. "It was like we accompanied each other on that road."

The retreats are just one of the many ways the Catholic Church in Michigan is accompanying those who have suffered abuse. In 2002, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) adopted the Dallas Charter for the Protection

of Children and Young People, setting the standard for how the Church would respond to the clergy sex abuse scandal. It was the start of a ripple effect of culture change within the Church that puts the protection of children front and center.

"The Church of the 21st century is safe for children."

Dr. Thomas Plante, former vice chair of the National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Youth

Today, in line with requirements of the Charter, each of the seven dioceses in Michigan adheres to a three-prong course of action. First, dioceses make available a designated professional to receive and report allegations of abuse and to provide victims with resources to help heal. Second, if an allegation of abuse comes forward, dioceses send the allegation to law enforcement before alerting a review board of mostly lay professionals to study the information received. The board then makes a recommendation to the bishop regarding any action to be taken in a case. Third, every diocese has established and prioritizes safe environment programs in parishes and schools to ensure adults who encounter children are vetted and trained to protect them.

This edition of **focus** analyzes and discusses how the Church in Michigan is carrying out the pledge to protect children and help heal those wounded by abuse. ■

Connect with Us

To stay up to date on the advocacy work of MCC, sign up to receive email updates through our Catholic Advocacy Network, or visit our website and social media pages.



Catholic
Advocacy
Network



Sign up to receive email updates
at micatholic.org/can



MICHIGAN
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE



Visit our website at
micatholic.org



Find **MichiganCatholicConference**
on Facebook



Follow **@MiCatholicConf**
on Twitter / X



Follow **micatholicconf**
on Instagram



MICHIGAN
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

Find us on **Facebook**, **X** and **Instagram**, visit us at micatholic.org, or call us at **(800) 395-5565**
© 2025 Michigan Catholic Conference, 510 South Capitol Avenue, Lansing, Michigan 48933

This publication was developed by the MCC Communications Department