

April 3, 2025

To: Montana House Judiciary Committee

From: Matthew Brower, Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference

Re: Testimony in opposition to HB 927

Madam Chair and members of the committee my name is Matt Brower. I serve as Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference. I speak today on behalf of the Roman Catholic bishops of Montana.

I am here to voice our opposition to House Bill 927.

The conference supports mandatory reporting statutes that address situations of child abuse and neglect, in large part because the victims of these very serious crimes are often incapable of reporting the wrongdoing. Minor victims in these situations are often unwilling or unable to report their abuse and instead depend on trusted adults who are more likely to identify signs of abuse or obtain information suggesting such abuse is occurring. But the circumstances that justify mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect are not broadly present in the scenarios envisioned by House Bill 927.

Our Catholic clergy are ordained and sent out to preach the gospel, celebrate the sacraments, visit the sick and imprisoned, attend to the dying and their families, help educate young people. And they do these things regardless of the life circumstances of those they minister to. Why? Because they understand that all people have inherent dignity—period. The recognition of this dignity helps to establish the credibility, trust and love that form the foundation of the relationships our clergy have with their congregations. Compelling our clergy to serve as law enforcement agents or immigration whistleblowers runs the risk of damaging this relationship and their ability to minister effectively.

Should HB 927 become law, one tragic result would be that those here without legal status would simply stop coming to church, stop seeking necessary services, stop coming to school. The potential chilling effect of this legislation cannot be overstated. This would no doubt include children with no culpability for their difficult and vulnerable situation. And the social cost of driving these families further away from the network of support they need in order to thrive would be extensive.

Madam Chair and members of the committee, we urge a “do not pass.” Thank you for your time.