



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES
COURAGE. JUSTICE. HOLY IMAGINATION.

30 W. Mifflin St., Ste 602
Madison, WI 53711
608-837-3108
www.wichurches.org

DATE: Monday, February 17, 2020
TO: Members of the Senate Committee on Local Government, Small Business, Tourism and Workforce Development; and the Assembly Committee on Housing and Real Estate
FROM: Peter Bakken, Justice and Witness Coordinator, Wisconsin Council of Churches
RE: Testimony in Support of the Wisconsin Opportunity Act, Senate Bill 467 and Assembly Bill 508

The Wisconsin Council of Churches (WCC) is a network of Christian churches and faith-based organizations committed to working together across our many differences. Exercising holy imagination, we help each other make courageous choices that lead toward peace with justice, the vitality of the church, and the well-being of our neighbors. The Council connects 20 Christian traditions, which have approximately 2,000 congregations and over one million church members in Wisconsin.

Many of our member churches and organizations are in the front lines of the fight against poverty in urban, suburban, and rural areas, sometimes in communities where many believe there is no poverty. They see how many individuals and families struggle with economic insecurity even in these supposedly good economic times. They see the courage, persistence, and resourcefulness of those who are forced to make hard choices with their limited means – like whether to buy groceries or pay the rent, or whether to pay for medicine or car repairs so they can get to work. They see the often-unrecognized contributions they make to their communities as caregivers and volunteers.

Emboldened by the faith that every person is a beloved child and image of God, they dare to imagine a truly just and compassionate world in which everyone is able to thrive, both contributing to and sharing in the common good of their communities. And they act to bring that vision a little closer to reality by helping meet their neighbors' needs for food, clothing, shelter, job training, literacy, basic household needs and more.

Of course, compassion and the desire for a more just and inclusive society are not restricted to one religious community, or to people who identify with a faith tradition. The responsibility to care for one another is a fundamental moral imperative for us as human beings, wherever we may find our ideals and inspiration. And so, our congregations work in partnership with community service organizations, including some of those you have heard from today.

But we know that even these joint efforts from the voluntary and charitable sectors of society are simply not enough to make our communities just and whole. The people of Wisconsin must also act through their state government to create solutions that will match the magnitude of the problem of poverty.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches therefore supports the Wisconsin Opportunity Act (SB 467 / AB 508) as an important step toward breaking through obstacles that keep so many of our neighbors from flourishing – obstacles like the lack of stable housing, lack of transportation, lack of access to health care, and the lack of employment and income. The research funding provided by the act will help to break through the ignorance, misunderstanding, and falsehoods that hamper our ability to find effective solutions to poverty.

The Wisconsin Opportunity Act will do more than enhance opportunities for people now living in poverty to improve their economic situation. It also offers them a greater measure of dignity, community, hope, health, and freedom to pursue their dreams for themselves and their families.

More than that, it offers *us*, the people of Wisconsin as a whole, an opportunity, whatever our economic status. Namely, the opportunity to come a little closer to being what our deepest moral convictions summon us to be – or, if you will, what God calls us to be: a just and compassionate community in which the well-being of every single person is of supreme importance, a society that flourishes because its every member can thrive.