

CESAR E. CHAVEZ DAY

House Bill 4319 (Substitute H-2) First Analysis (10-7-03)

Sponsor: Rep. John Gleason
Committee: Great Lakes and Tourism

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

The text of House Bill 4319 contains the following statement, which serves as the justification for designating a special day in recognition of Cesar E. Chavez (1927-1993):

“The legislature recognizes the fundamental contribution that Cesar E. Chavez made to this nation by organizing farm workers to campaign for safe and fair working conditions, reasonable wages, decent housing, and the outlawing of child labor. Cesar Chavez began working in the fields of Arizona and California at the age of 10. Profoundly influenced by these humble beginnings, Chavez embraced the nonviolent principles of Mohandas Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to crusade against racial and economic discrimination, coordinate voter registration drives, and found the United Farm Workers of America. In 1994, Chavez was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor given to civilians by the United States government. In memory of this great American, the legislature declares that March 31 of each year shall be known as Cesar E. Chavez Day.” The bill concludes: “The legislature encourages individuals, governmental and educational institutions, and community organizations to pause on Cesar E. Chavez Day and reflect upon his courage and sacrifice.”

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would designate March 31 of each year as Cesar E. Chavez Day in Michigan.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The following background information was derived from the House Legislative Analysis Section’s analysis of House Bill 5220 (Public Act 362 of 2002) of the previous session, which named a portion of a highway in Grand Rapids for Cesar E. Chavez.

In 1994, Cesar Estrada Chavez was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously, to

recognize a lifetime of unrelenting effort and countless selfless acts that re-formed or removed many unyielding institutional structures that dehumanize people who live in poverty. After he died on April 23, 1993 at age 66, more than 40,000 people attended his funeral, little wonder since a 1975 Lou Harris poll showed that 17 million American adults were at that time honoring the grape boycott he began five years earlier.

Cesar E. Chavez grew up on a small family farm near Yuma, Arizona where his grandfather homesteaded during the 1880s. His father lost the farm during the Depression, and when he was 10 years old, he and the other members of his family became migrant farm workers. Chavez served in the western Pacific with the U.S. Navy during World War II, then settled with his new wife in the East San Jose barrio close to the apricot orchards and the Delano vineyards where he worked. In 1952, Chavez joined the Community Service Organization (CSO), a barrio-based self-help group sponsored by Chicago-based Saul Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation, where as a full-time organizer, and later as national director, he coordinated voter registration drives, battled racial and economic discrimination against Chicano residents, and organized new CSO chapters across California and Arizona. After 10 years he left the CSO, in order to form the National Farm Workers Association, moving with his wife and eight children to Delano, California. In 1963, after three years of slow recruitment in the fields of California farm communities, the NFWA claimed 1,200 member families, and the group joined an AFL-CIO sponsored union in a strike against major Delano area table and wine grape growers. Against great odds, Chavez led a successful five-year strike that rallied millions of supporters--a coalition of unions, church groups, students, minorities, and consumers--to the United Farm Workers. In 1966, the NFWA and the UFW merged and affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

The UFW adopted the principles of non-violence that were practiced by Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The 1965 strikers took a pledge of non-

violence, and Chavez conducted a 25-day fast in 1968 to reaffirm the UFW's commitment to non-violence. In 1975, the state of California enacted a collective bargaining law for farm workers, called the Agricultural Labor Relations Act, and by the early 1980s, unionized farm workers numbered in the tens of thousands, able to work under contracts that ensured higher pay, family health coverage, pension benefits, and other contract protections.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

The bill would have no fiscal implications, according to the House Fiscal Agency. (HFA committee summary dated 10-1-03)

ARGUMENTS:

For:

For all of the reasons expressed elsewhere in the analysis, the bill would have the state pay tribute to Cesar E. Chavez by designating a day for the remembrance of his contributions to his country.

POSITIONS:

A representative of the Chavez Commission in Lansing testified in support of the bill. (10-2-03)

A representative of the AFL-CIO has indicated support for the bill. (10-2-03)

A representative of the UAW has indicated support for the bill. (10-2-03)

Analyst: C. Couch

■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.