



2005 BIENNIAL BUDGET BILL

INTRODUCTION

On February 8, Governor Doyle introduced his proposed biennial state budget for 2005-07 (Assembly Bill 100). Between February and July the legislature will review the Governor's proposal as modified by the Joint Committee on Finance and consider amendments to it.

BUDGETS FROM A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

While government budgets are laden with numbers, statistics and estimates, fundamentally they are about people and the priorities of the community. And while the Wisconsin Catholic Conference does not take a position on the budget as a whole, the Conference does urge Catholics to assess budgets in light of their impact on the common good, the extent to which they exercise a preferential option for the poor, and the degree to which they foster solidarity among the citizens of our state.

Based upon these broad principles, the WCC has identified four specific areas of interest and concern to engage as the budget debate progresses over the next several months.

SPECIFIC ISSUES

Maintain Funding for Programs Targeted to the Needy

Programs that provide services to needy individuals and their families are always a priority for the WCC. Among these are the Community Aids program through which the state helps counties fund locally based human services programs, and medical assistance programs, such as Medicaid and BadgerCare, which provide persons with disabilities and families with low-income access to health care services.

The Governor's budget spares these programs from spending cuts. However, as was the case in 2003, he avoids such reductions by relying on other revenue sources, such as federal dollars and the Patient Compensation Fund. If the legislature decides not to approve these funding arrangements, it will either have to find other funding sources or impose reductions in these programs for the needy.

The WCC only rarely addresses the specific question of which revenue sources should pay for government programs, other than to encourage that taxes be based on a person's ability to pay them. The more critical question is: Are we doing enough to help needy citizens support themselves and to participate fully in the life of the community?

As one considers this question, it is important to note that Wisconsin has made significant strides in providing quality health care access to children and families in need. Similarly, our state's "safety net" is stronger than that of most other states. This is an important factor in Wisconsin's high quality of life and an important measure of our state's commitment to social justice.

Please urge legislators to sustain state support for Community Aids, BadgerCare, and other programs funded with medical assistance dollars to keep health and family services available to needy families and persons with disabilities.

Support Ethical Stem Cell Research

The budget includes funding for a multi-year, multi-million dollar initiative to expand the growing biotechnology research and development sector of Wisconsin's economy. Most of the initiative may be worthy of support. However, some of this funding will support research on stem cells derived from destroyed human embryos. Human life is sacred, even life at the earliest stages of development. As such it must be respected and protected. Embryonic stem cell research treats embryos as *things*; things that people own and have the power to manipulate, patent and destroy, thus undermining the sacredness of life.

Please urge legislators to oppose public funding for research on stem cells obtained by destroying human embryos. Research should focus on stem cells derived through ethical means, such as adult stem cells.

A New Direction in Corrections Policy

The budget includes initiatives to foster alternatives to prison for offenders that are consistent with the 1999 WCC statement on corrections. These include:

1) Additional funding to address mental health needs of prisoners; **2)** expanding community based options for offenders at risk of being returned to prison for parole violations; **3)** reducing the term of extended supervision in the community for inmates released from prison; **4)** creating a grant program to fund civil legal services for indigent offenders once they are released; and **5)** re-examining sentencing guidelines for people who are non-violent and who are drug or alcohol dependent.

Please urge legislators to support initiatives to provide education and treatment to persons in the prison system and to seek alternatives to incarceration for non-violent drug and alcohol offenders.

Maintaining the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program fosters the goal of affirming parents as the primary educators of their children. Because the Choice program permits parents to choose religious schools, it also enhances cooperation between religious groups and government in ways that meet the needs of low-income families.

The program is popular and each year more parents in Milwaukee want vouchers for their children. However, current law "caps" the number of vouchers at just under 15,000 students. WCC and others supporters of the Choice program support an effort to lift the cap to allow more families to participate in the program.

Please urge legislators and the Governor to "lift the cap" on the voucher program to meet future demand.

ACTION REQUESTED

Urge Legislators to support the positions identified above in the areas of Community Aids, Medicaid/Badgercare, embryonic stem cell research, corrections, and the Parental Choice Program.

For more information, please contact the Wisconsin Catholic Conference at 608/257-0004.