



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

**TESTIMONY ON JANUARY SPECIAL SESSION WELFARE REFORM BILLS
Presented to the Senate Committee on Public Benefits, Licensing and State-Federal
Relations, and Assembly Committee on Public Benefit Reform
By Barbara Sella, Associate Director
January 31, 2018**

On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), thank you for this opportunity to testify on the welfare reform bills of January 2018 Special Session.

When welfare reform was first being debated 23 years ago, the Catholic bishops issued a statement (*Reforming Welfare By Valuing Families, A Statement From The Roman Catholic Bishops Of Wisconsin*, September 1995), in which they emphasized that “welfare programs must be ordered to helping people realize their potential, not because society owes them a living but because every person must satisfy basic needs in order to fulfill their personal and social obligations.” It is with this principle in mind and based on the practical experience of our Catholic Charities agencies and Society of St. Vincent de Paul councils, who regularly minister to families in need, that we offer our evaluation of several bills in this package.

First, we have some concerns with JR8 Senate/Assembly Bill 1 and JR8 Senate/Assembly Bill 2. These bills alter the FoodShare employment and training program requirements. The federal government altered its requirements and gave states the ability to adjust the number of hours of employment and training participation for the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) due to a recognition that states need flexibility to achieve program success. The WCC requests that before enacting a statutory provision that removes that flexibility, there should be a broader conversation with stakeholders, especially local government entities, to ensure that they can assist individuals in meeting these new requirements. The bills are silent on the fiscal, transportation, and other resources necessary to make compliance possible and not punitive. We are concerned that an increasing focus on serving the most employable clients might result in a failure to adequately serve those with the greatest need for assistance and with the greatest barriers to employment. This includes those who care for adult family members or children over the age of 6, or who have chronic conditions that are limiting, but do not constitute a “disability” as defined in statute. These pressures may increase if payment structures are increasingly performance-based.

We oppose JR8 Senate/Assembly Bill 3, which alters or institutes new limitations on eligibility for certain public benefit programs based on the ownership of assets. While the WCC supports the inclusion of a hardship exemption from asset eligibility restrictions, there is still the likelihood that families of fairly limited means may be prevented from accessing benefits, especially large families who, out of necessity, have larger family vehicles, or families who have children with special needs, and therefore, have homes and vehicles that may be more expensive because of necessary modifications.

We oppose JR8 Senate/Assembly Bill 4, which institute drug screening for all public housing authority residents. While the WCC supports helping people escape drug dependency and embrace healthy and responsible lifestyles, these kinds of measures fail to recognize that drug abuse afflicts all income levels and that most of those in drug treatment programs relapse several times before achieving lasting recovery. The bill does not address whether individuals will continue to receive treatment upon relapse or if there are sufficient community resources necessary to make compliance with this restriction possible.

We oppose JR8 Senate/Assembly Bill 10, which create and require the use of a photo identification card when making a purchase using the FoodShare program. The Church teaches that food is a human right. Wisconsin's FoodShare program must offer support to those facing hunger, not judgment or presumption.

Families facing poverty and limited means must depend upon one another to fulfill daily tasks and meet daily needs. This means children or other members of the household may be tasked with making food purchases for the home. Limiting such purchases to a FoodShare recipient or their "authorized representative" could have disastrous effects. The process would likely require verifying photo identification with a program participant while surrounding customers are present at a store. The stigma and embarrassment of increased scrutiny could deter some eligible individuals from participating in the program or utilizing their full FoodShare allocation. It could also drive participants to refrain from making food purchases at facilities that do not serve large populations of FoodShare participants, but that may offer healthier or more economical options, for fear of being questioned or identified.

We support JR8 Senate/Assembly Bill 5, which create a pilot and permanent program to make Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) payments periodic. Our only suggestion is that the Legislature consider, not just a pilot involving monthly payments, but also one involving quarterly payments, since the latter may demonstrate that recipients are more likely to save or make essential purchases when they receive larger payments.

We support JR8 Senate/Assembly Bill 7, which establish a pay for success trust fund to contract with private funders in order to provide improved services for those in need. This model has been used successfully in several other states to combat homelessness and reduce recidivism. We believe that the public/private partnerships it establishes and the performance metrics it requires are vital to addressing our state's long-standing social, economic, and correctional challenges.

There are several other bills that the WCC is not commenting on at this time because there has not been sufficient time to analyze them or to contact the stakeholders who are best able to assess their impact.

In conclusion, reforming welfare so as to reduce poverty and dependency requires the involvement of government and the private sector working cooperatively. Reforms must ensure that people in poverty do not become targets, but rather that they receive the supports and services appropriate to their needs. Self-sufficiency and self-determination require that those in poverty be listened to and respectfully engaged. Overly bureaucratic and punitive measures to

reduce fraud and encourage responsibility all too often have the opposite effect of deepening hopelessness and further impoverishing the most vulnerable. The problem of poverty requires a holistic approach, something that our Catholic Charities agencies and Society of St. Vincent de Paul councils have been doing for decades.

We respectfully urge committee members to support Senate Bills 5 and 7, but to oppose the bills indicated above. We strongly recommend that an overhaul of our state's welfare system not be rushed, but instead be developed with the help of a broader coalition of stakeholders, either through a Legislative Study Committee or a special Task Force. For our part, the Catholic Church in Wisconsin stands ready to help in this and any other efforts to serve the common good and protect human dignity.

Thank you.