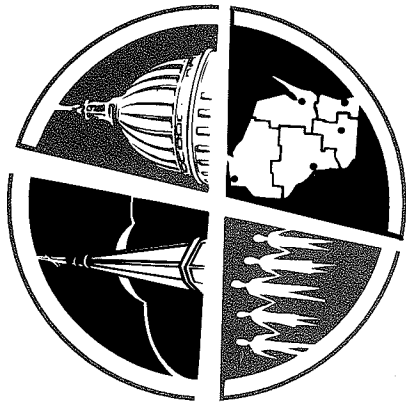


PARISH INVOLVEMENT
IN
WELFARE REFORM



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Guidelines from
the Wisconsin Catholic Conference

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Catholic Involvement in Welfare Reform

This document is meant to assist Catholic parishes, agencies, and individual Catholics in Wisconsin in becoming involved in the dramatic reform of the welfare system—the “Wisconsin Works” program, commonly referred to as “W-2”—which takes effect on September 1, 1997.

This document has been prepared by the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, which is the public policy arm of the state’s Roman Catholic Bishops.

Why is the Church Involved in Welfare Reform?

Welfare reform presents a challenge and opportunity for Catholics to live out their call to model Gospel values by assuming a leadership role in offering charity, pursuing justice, and providing services to the needy people in our midst.

The Bishops of Wisconsin ground this call in the Church’s Catholic social teaching, which has consistently affirmed the importance of economic justice, particularly for the poor. As Pope John Paul II has written in *Centesimus Annus*, “The church’s love for the poor...is a part of her constant tradition” (#57). According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a preferential love on the part of the Church which, since her origin and in spite of the failings of many of her members, has not ceased to work for their relief, defense, and liberation through numerous works of charity which remain indispensable always and everywhere” (#2448).

Consequently, “as followers of Christ, we are challenged to make a fundamental ‘option for the poor’ — to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenseless, to assess life styles, policies, and social institutions in terms of the impact on the poor” (*Economic Justice for All*, #16). In their 1995 statement, *Reforming Welfare by*

Valuing Families, Wisconsin's Bishops urged policy makers not to abandon the poor, calling particular attention to the need to protect children in any reform of the welfare system. In many respects, parishes and individual Catholics are already "on the front line" in aiding the poor people and their families who come to them for assistance. This experience will be vital in helping those affected by the removal of the government's safety net. Some parishes, located in more affluent areas of our state, may have had less direct experience with the poor. All parishes, however, are called to use their moral authority and "social capital" to respond to the needs of the poor in our midst.

The guidelines were developed by the Wisconsin Catholic Conference in consultation with Catholic Charities agencies, diocesan Social Concerns Offices, and representatives of local parishes. They suggest formal and informal avenues for Catholics - both as individuals and through formal involvement in parishes and Catholic agencies - to respond to this call for leadership, and highlight potential concerns which need to be addressed prior to involvement in the Wisconsin Works welfare reform program.

What is Welfare Reform?

Welfare reform can be summarized as a series of policy changes that replace the federal program Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with state programs funded in part by a federal block grant called the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). AFDC operated as an entitlement with sufficient funds to meet the needs of all those who were eligible for the program, subject to extensive federal and state regulation. TANF carries no entitlement and states are free to use the funds in almost any way they see fit. "Wisconsin Works" (W-2) is the state's means of enacting these changes in the welfare system.

3. Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy, by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986. (Available at your local bookstore.)

4. W-2 Policy Document for Pilot Counties, by the Wisconsin Department of Work Force Development, March 1, 1997. (Copies available from your county W-2 office.)

Who Will be Affected by Welfare Reform?

The exact impact of welfare reform on poor families will not be determined for some time. However, three categories of the poor appear especially vulnerable.

1. Poor families with children, especially single parent families. These have long constituted the bulk of the AFDC caseload. As of late 1996, an estimated 50,000 Wisconsin families relied on AFDC for significant amounts of their monthly income. Critical needs facing this population may include: inadequate child care, lack of health insurance, and a lack of job skills and the education/training to acquire them.

2. Immigrants and refugees. Federal law ends eligibility for food stamps for most immigrants. The law also places a seven year limit on SSI and other benefits to legal immigrants, refugees, or asylees who entered the US after August 22, 1996. Some state officials suggest the loss of food stamps will affect about 7,200 people in Wisconsin.

Critical needs facing this population may include: income supplements to compensate for inadequate grants and loss of food stamps, job mentoring and language training, and more extensive education and training than needed by many others in the W-2 program. To the extent that immigrants and refugees are eligible to become citizens, they may need assistance and sponsorship to complete the naturalization process, before their eligibility for SSI and other benefits expires.

3. Single adults without children. The federal law limits jobless adults without minor children to three months of food stamps over a three year period. In Wisconsin, about 7,000 people will be adversely affected by this change.

It is further estimated that half of these are women over the age of 40. These individuals are likely to have pressing needs for basic necessities such as food, shelter and clothing.

Preparing the Poor for Work - How Will W-2 Function?

Under the Wisconsin Works program, families currently on AFDC and new participants will be placed in one of four work categories:

- Unsubsidized Employment - these private sector jobs will pay "market wages";
- Trial Jobs - these private sector jobs will pay minimum wage, \$892/month;
- Community Service Jobs (CSJs) are created by government or the private sector and will pay grants between \$555-\$673/month;
- Transitional Placements (TPs) are also created by government or the private sector and will pay grants between \$518-\$628/month.

State officials have projected that 75 percent of the families in W-2 will be placed in either the CSJs or TPs categories.

Community Service Jobs are available to individuals who "are determined unsuitable for immediate regular employment," and "are intended to provide participants with an opportunity to practice work habits and skills that are necessary to succeed in any regular job environment, including punctuality, reliability, work social skills, and the application of sustained and productive effort." Examples of work assignments for those in CSJs might include: health aide, clerical or administrative aide, teacher's aide, personal assistant, driver, maintenance worker, neighborhood watch patrol or similar activities.

Transitional Placements are available for individuals who cannot

anticipated by W-2 to meet basic needs of the poor.

†Catholics who own and operate businesses should be encouraged to hire those currently on welfare or those who apply for W-2 services in the future.

Businesses that help in this way should be affirmed. Church agencies should look for ways to assist those who find jobs from other employers as they move toward independence.

Conclusion

Welfare reform is an ongoing effort that will demand the attention and involvement of citizens across Wisconsin for years to come. Catholics have an important contribution to make to this reform process. It is hoped that the guidelines and resources identified here will prove useful to those Catholics and others who answer the call to make that contribution.

Resources

Those interested in learning more about welfare reform are encouraged to contact their diocesan Offices of Social Concerns/Justice and Peace or their Catholic Charities agency as well as their county W-2 agency. Other resources that may be useful are the following:

1. Reforming Welfare by Valuing Families: A Statement by the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, September, 1995. (Copies are available from the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, 30 W. Mifflin Street, Suite 302, Madison, WI 53703.)
2. Putting Children and Families First, by the United States Catholic Conference, 1991. (Copies can be obtained through your diocesan Social Concerns/Justice & Peace Office.)

native and native English speakers alike, and thus Catholics should also consider offering literacy education to all participants in W-2 (and, indeed, for all who need and want it).

Gathering Information: It is expected that parish and agency contacts with individuals affected by changes in the welfare system will increase. It is important to document any increase your parish or agency experiences that arises from the change from AFDC to W-2. That information can then be used by diocesan Offices of Justice and Peace or Social Concerns and the Wisconsin Catholic Conference to advocate for modifications of the reform program.

† *Catholics are encouraged to seek appointment to County W-2 Steering Committees.*

W-2 provides for community-based steering committees intended to develop public and private job opportunities and craft solutions to problems such as child care and transportation needs. Members will include social service professionals, employers, community leaders, educators, and service organization representatives. Participation in such committees is an effective way to offer a constructive contribution to the ongoing development of welfare reform in our state.

† *In addition to seeking membership on County W-2 Committees, Catholics are encouraged to seek ways to assume "informal leadership" in community welfare reform efforts.*

The Wisconsin Works program assumes increased collaboration between state and private sector organizations in communities. Parish leaders and active parishioners are encouraged to take the lead in working with other parishes and, in an ecumenical spirit, with other churches to identify and meet the needs of poor families. At times, such leadership will include a candid assessment that government agencies must do more than

successfully participate in any of the other three work categories for reasons such as physical, mental health or cognitive limitations, substance abuse problems, or the need to remain in the home to care for another family member who is severely incapacitated or disabled. Examples of work activities for those in a transitional placement might include sheltered workshop activities, volunteer activities, or jobs similar to those for Community Service Jobs.

People in CSJs and TPs may find work with public, private non-profit and private for-profit employers, including religious organizations.

In some parts of Wisconsin, Catholic Charities agencies may decide to collaborate with county W-2 participants in providing either CSJs or TPs. However, many of those in these work slots will require additional services and support. Few, if any, parishes can be expected to have the resources and practical experience that enable a diocesan Catholic Charities agency to work effectively with W-2 participants in these job preparation programs.

Guidelines for Parishes

General Principles

† *Catholic parishes and organizations should be "welcoming communities" for Wisconsin's poor.*

It is to the parish that the poor are most likely to turn first when seeking help. It is critically important that those in need are greeted with a helping hand and a smile that make them feel valued and welcome. Rather than waiting for the poor to "knock on the door," parishes and other Catholic agencies should invite the needy to seek help at the local Catholic church or association, regardless of their religious faith.

Moreover, this willingness to help the needy should come from all in the parish, not merely from those who are part of designated committees or ministries. It is the involvement of all Catholics in this ministry to the poor that makes it a truly community undertaking for the parish or Catholic organization.

† *All Catholics and Catholic agencies should treat the poor with respect and affirmation.*

Some advocates of welfare reform have suggested that poverty is a sign of some moral failing in the individual. They encourage churches to include moral instruction as part of efforts to help the poor. This view is not consistent with the Catholic tradition.

Rather, the church believes that the poor who come to us for help are morally upright people who lack material resources and are treated accordingly. No doubt some will need moral guidance and counsel and, when appropriate, such support should be provided. However, Catholics should be discerning in their approach to those who come to them in need of help. A discerning approach recognizes the innate dignity and worth of the person and then responds to his or her particular needs.

A good "rule of thumb" for parish staff and others is to treat the poor as you would treat other members of your parish in need of pastoral care at a moment of crisis in their lives.

† *In responding to the needs of the poor, special priority should be given to the needs of children and of parents' need for support in their efforts to raise and nurture their children.*

Welfare reform places a heavy emphasis on work. However, this emphasis must not devalue the importance of parenting. Catholics should make every effort to keep welfare reform as "family friendly" as possible and keep the needs of families, especially children, in the forefront of their activities.

Recommendations for Individual Catholics

† *Parishes should encourage individual Catholics to give more time as volunteers to programs and activities that help the poor and to be supportive of their needs.*

While Catholics, like many others, find it difficult to find time to do all they would like, the end of welfare as we know it means that individuals and communities will have to do more. Examples of such volunteer activity include:

Mentoring: Mentoring activities include offering advice on work, social skills, self-presentation, job hunting, economic planning, and the like. Mentors can accompany W-2 participants to meetings with the county W-2 agency to ensure participants are being treated fairly and respectfully. In some more extreme cases, a mentor could take responsibility for ensuring that a welfare recipient is showered, appropriately dressed, and shows up on-time for work.

Anyone who wants to mentor must be aware that it is a challenging activity. Often mentors feel compelled to help solve every problem of the person or family they are assisting. Before an individual or a parish takes on a mentoring role, they must be prepared for it. Such preparation should involve seeking assistance and advice from Catholic Charities agencies or others about the limits and boundaries of mentoring and coaching needy persons. It is also necessary for mentors to know where they can go for help when they need it.

Tutoring: As noted above, immigrants and refugees are a particularly vulnerable population. Catholics can reach out to this population by offering the crucial language training which will allow these people to improve their economic prospects and their lives. Again, this can be done individually, or as a parish-wide effort. Fostering literacy skills, of course, is important for non-

policies of separation of church and state;

- b. with diocesan Catholic Charities agencies for guidance on supervising or assisting people who may have emotional or other difficulties that serve as a barrier to employment.

Helping Needy Families

† *A parish's decision not to hire persons in CS/Is or TPs should only reinforce its determination to seek out other ways to help needy families. Often parishes and others can be most helpful by aiding the poor in removing or coping with those conditions that prevent them from working. Such possibilities include:*

Linking local employers with needy families. Many times those willing to work and employers in need of workers are unaware of each other. A parish can help connect W-2 participants with employers willing to give them a chance.

Connecting the poor to those who can help them. Often the poor are isolated from the community and unaware of resources and opportunities many of us take for granted. Parish communities can help link needy families to the larger community. Parishes can be especially helpful by putting poor families in touch with individuals and groups who can help them understand and comply with W-2 program requirements.

Helping with child care needs. Finding safe and affordable child care is one of the greatest difficulties and one of the greatest fears of working parents. Because W-2 requires parents to work once their children are 12 weeks old, the demand for child care—and especially care for newborns and infants—is expected to increase dramatically. In many instances, Catholics can most effectively further the goals of welfare reform by providing affordable and good quality child care services.

† *As parishes and lay Catholic agencies assess their capacity to assist families in need of assistance, they should consult with and, where possible, collaborate with other churches and community organizations to assure wise and efficient use of resources.*

No church or faith community has a monopoly on wisdom or compassion. Every neighborhood has its unique form of “social capital” that can be invested in helping its needy members. Successful welfare reform will depend on every group effectively using the gifts and resources at its disposal. Catholic organizations should model such effective cooperation wherever possible.

† *Catholics and others who hope to be helpful to the poor must also be honest about their limitations.*

Some people who approach parishes and Catholic groups for help will come to them after being trapped for years in a “cycle of poverty.” While we must always be willing to help, this willingness must be accompanied by a realization that some people will have needs that the parish or individual Catholics cannot address. In such instances, the most Christian response may be to put the needy person in touch with other resources more suited to his/her needs.

Diocesan Support for Parishes

It is anticipated that parishes and individual Catholics will often lack awareness both of W-2 regulations and other resources to help the poor in their communities. In many cases, these parishes and individuals will require assistance in tailoring a response to a specific request.

† Each diocese should identify a specific office or department to serve as a clearinghouse for responding to requests from parishes and local organizations for information about how parish and diocesan agencies are assisting the poor.

While no single diocesan office can be expected to meet every need or request for help, it should be possible to identify a single point of contact in order to help connect parishes with appropriate resources and information. Regardless of where this contact is located, parish staff and others should feel confident that they have the support of the diocese in navigating red tape, and identifying the office, agency, or program that can help them address the demands made on them at the local level.

Special Issues for Parishes

† Parishes should generally refrain from taking on a role of providing Community Service Jobs (CSJs) or Transitional Placements (TPs). Those parishes who wish to consider doing so should consider the following issues before proceeding.

1. *Can the parish provide the person with a meaningful work opportunity?* Many W-2 clients lack basic job skills. Employers should be prepared to provide extensive mentoring and support to them. Parishes especially must assess their ability to do this.

2. *Is the parish prepared to offer just compensation?* Participants in CSJs and TPs will receive a monthly grant in close approximation to the minimum wage. However, since this income is treated as a cash grant and not a wage, participants will not be eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit, which provides substantial tax relief for people with poverty level incomes.

Catholic employers are urged to supplement the grant received by the participant so that the remuneration meets or exceeds the minimum hourly wage.

3. *Is the parish prepared to comply with Department of Workforce Development (DWD) policies regulating employers of W-2 participants?* W-2 regulations require employers to enter into a written agreement with the county W-2 agency to assure that:

- a. the employer will collect and verify time and attendance records and immediately notify the W-2 agency of participant tardiness or absence, upon which the participant will be sanctioned by the W-2 agency.
- b. the employer will not substitute W-2 employees for regular employees either by terminating a regular employee or otherwise downsizing to accommodate the W-2 participant.
- c. no employee may be asked or required to participate in any task or activity which promotes or discourages religious activity.

At this point there is no detailed road map for what work activities might be impermissible for W-2 participants who take work assignments arranged by churches. However, past rulings suggest that activities not related to education of children or religious worship are more likely to be acceptable. Thus, it would appear that activities related to assisting the elderly, transportation, maintenance, recreation, and child care would be permissible. Activities related to religious education, worship activities, and prayer services should be avoided.

Recommended Consultation for Parishes Involved in W-2

† *If after considering these issues, a parish wishes to proceed with providing work opportunities for W-2 participants, it should consult with diocesan offices as follows:*

- a. with fiscal offices on issues of liability, financial accountability and whether or not a work activity violates