



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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CATHOLIC CONFERENCE ON STATE BUDGET: EXPAND SCHOOL CHOICE, PROTECT HEALTH CARE FOR POOR

As the public policy voice of Wisconsin's Roman Catholic bishops, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) supports and affirms many of the measures included in Governor Scott Walker's 2013-15 state biennial budget proposal. However, the WCC has some concerns that may require further review and revision.

The WCC supports the promotion of innovative and quality education in the budget, including the expansion of parental choice programs and the creation of the Special Needs Scholarship Program. Both proposals are a step forward in empowering all parents with the ability to choose a school that best meets their child's needs.

John Huebscher, Executive Director of the WCC, said that by giving more parents around the state a greater say in the education of their children, the initiatives further a basic tenet of Catholic social teaching. "We support parental choice as a matter of principle," he noted. "This isn't about whether a Catholic school exists in a particular community and could participate in the program. It is about affirming measures that support parents as the primary educators of their children. These programs recognize that those of limited means often have limited options."

Nor, he added, should support for school choice initiatives be seen as a threat to, or an indictment of, public education. "Catholic schools are not competitors with their public counterparts, but partners," Huebscher explained. "Indeed, we continue to respect the excellence evident in many public schools. But we maintain that taxpayer support for both public and private institutions is a hallmark of our democracy. For example, Catholic hospitals and Catholic universities have long existed side-by-side with public hospitals and universities. All receive federal and state funds in order to assist low-income individuals. So too, should it be with primary and secondary schools."

The WCC supports the nearly \$30 million dedicated to mental health initiatives that will encourage better diagnosis, treatment, and public understanding of those with mental illness. The Governor also proposed providing \$11 million to aid victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.

"Budgets are moral documents where society gives witness to helping vulnerable populations," Huebscher said. "Mental health and domestic violence aids do that and we hope they remain in the budget upon its passage into law."

The WCC has concerns over a proposal to restructure the state's Medicaid system. Earlier, the Governor announced that Wisconsin would forgo expansion of Medicaid coverage for certain

adults with annual incomes at or below 133% of the federal poverty level (\$15,276 for a single person). States are not required to expand their Medicaid program, but under the federal health care reform law, if states choose to do so, federal entities would pay a significant portion of the costs for those newly eligible.

Instead, the Governor's proposal is to extend coverage for adults earning 100% of the poverty level (which is \$11,490 annually for a single person or \$23,550 for a family of four), and in 2014, to move some of those currently eligible for Medicaid into new federal health exchanges. These individuals would receive a subsidy through the federal government to help pay for their coverage.

"Our guiding principle is that every person has a moral claim to access affordable health care," Huebscher noted. "We need to examine this proposal more carefully to be sure that people being transferred or directed to exchanges can truly afford the coverage made available to them."

Those who oppose Medicaid expansion worry that the federal dollars used to finance the expansion may be reduced or eliminated in future years, leaving the state to pay for the program. Huebscher noted that these concerns have some merit, but also noted that the health needs of the poor must be met, even through imperfect or uncertain means. "What is imperative is that Wisconsin continues to be a leader in providing affordable, quality health care that meets the needs of its residents, especially those with significant or chronic health issues."

"Overall, the Governor's budget gives a solid foundation from which the Legislature can build upon and improve the common good in our state," said Huebscher. "The WCC will continue to monitor the progress of this important legislation and offer careful reflection as we move towards its passage."

The WCC will address these and other budget issues in greater length as the budget bill moves through the Legislature.

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