



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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ONE DAY, TWO HEARINGS, SAME STORY: SOCIETY DOESN'T VALUE CHILDREN

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

Anyone who wants to know how much our society values vulnerable children need only take note of two hearings held in the same city, Madison, on the same day, February 4th, to get an answer: nowhere near as much as we should.

Beginning at 10:00am, a joint hearing by the two legislative committees that address issues affecting children and families heard testimony from a variety of perspectives on "The State of Wisconsin's Families and Children in an Economic Crisis."

The picture painted was not a pretty one. Those in attendance heard a litany of need and pain as experts described how many families and children are in need as economic conditions worsen. Here is some of what the committee members heard:

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families testified that 18% of our state's children - nearly one child in five - is now living in poverty.

The Children's Trust Fund told the panel that rising rates of poverty and unemployment are predictors of increases in child abuse and neglect. Both are increasing in Wisconsin.

A representative of a program serving homeless youth reported a 17% increase in youth receiving shelter in 2008. Sadly, the program had to turn away 24% more youth than it did the previous year. And a larger share of these homeless youth are parents themselves.

Another expert on the state's foster care program reported that a study of our state's most populous county found that one third of kinship and foster care providers within the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare lived below the poverty line, and one in six live at less than half the poverty line. And this was before the current recession began.

The Milwaukee Hunger Task Force told the panel that in October 2008, 34% of food pantry users reported they have decreased the amount of food served to their children within the last month.

Each of these trends and developments represents personal and policy choices that work against children and devalue the needs of those who take care of them.

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When parents are laid off, children suffer. When health care is unaffordable, children don't get well. When food stamps and pantries can't meet the need, children go hungry. When families are evicted from foreclosed homes, children become homeless.

Legislators listened carefully. They understood the immense challenges facing the youth of our state, especially those living in poverty, and they promised to help make things better.

Four hours later, a second hearing began. The UW Hospital and Clinics Authority Board heard three hours of testimony on a plan to perform second-term abortions at a surgery center operated by UW Hospital and Clinics. After three hours of testimony, including an impassioned letter from Madison Bishop Robert Morlino, the Board voted to approve the plan. When asked to weigh the lives of unborn children against the choices of adults, the children lost, just as they have in so many other ways in our society.

The common thread between these two hearings is that other policy priorities have a way of trumping what is best for children. Rather than offering quality education and opportunities for employment, we offer quick fixes and inadequate support. Rather than providing access to health care, we offer greater access to abortion.

The message from the two hearings is clear. We can and must do better.