



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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BUDGET HEARINGS OFFER CHANCE TO INFLUENCE POLICY

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

We can't live out our vocation as faithful citizens unless we are also active between elections, when the hard work of making laws and policies is done.

Some of that hard work will take place in the next few weeks when the Joint Committee on Finance schedules its hearings on Governor Walker's state budget proposal. Those hearings will give Catholics and others a chance to influence the content of that budget. It is a chance we should exploit.

Living in a democracy means we get to vote in elections. But the right to vote does us no good if we don't use it. When we don't vote, we give more power to the people who do.

By the same token, we have the right to contact the people who represent us and to speak at the public hearings held on bills and rules. When we don't do those things, legislators and agency officials listen only to the people who do.

So when the hearings are scheduled, think about attending and registering to testify for two minutes on the issue or issues of concern to you. If you are queasy about speaking in public, you can register for or against a certain part of the budget.

The budget affects our lives in many ways. The Wisconsin Catholic Conference is asking you to focus on several issues:

1. Urge legislators to support the right of parents to send their children to the school that best helps their children by backing the Governors' plan to allow more families to use vouchers at religious and independent schools.
2. Urge that any reform of the Medicaid system ensures that those who are vulnerable or have limited means receive quality, affordable health care.
3. Urge legislators to remove the budget provision that exempts rent-to-own agreements from the Consumer Protection Act – a provision that badly weakens consumer protection for low-income families susceptible to predatory lending practices.

4. Urge legislators to support the “11 x 15” initiative to reduce our prison population by diverting non-violent drug and alcohol offenders into community treatment and supervision programs.

Offering testimony at a hearing can be intimidating, especially if you have not done it before. But it is not that difficult if you follow some basic rules.

Be brief. The hearings attract large numbers of people. No one wants to listen to long speeches. Deliver your message in two minutes. If you do it well, legislators will ask questions and you can expand on your message.

Be prepared. Write out what you want to say ahead of time. Offer facts based on your experience or knowledge.

Be respectful. Don’t question the motives or character of people who disagree with you.

If you can’t get to the hearing or are uncomfortable speaking, take the time to write a letter to your legislators. They do read them and enough well-written letters can change a lawmaker’s mind.

If you need any assistance, or would like to learn more about any of these four issues, please don’t hesitate to write WCC staff at office@wisconsinatholic.org or to call us at 608-257-0004.

Citizenship does require our involvement and good government depends on our willingness to be involved citizens. The budget hearings offer an open door to our government. We need to walk in and be part of the conversation.