



## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Members, Joint Committee on Finance

FROM: John Huebscher, Executive Director

DATE: March 23, 2009

RE: Comments Relating to the Executive Budget Bill – AB 75

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On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), I want to respectfully submit this written testimony on certain provisions of the proposed 2009-11 budget.

Although government budgets are laden with numbers, statistics, and estimates, fundamentally they are about people and the priorities of the community. While the WCC does not take a position on the budget as a whole, the Conference does urge Catholics and others to assess budgets in light of their impact on the common good, the extent to which they exercise a preferential option for the poor, and the degree to which they foster solidarity among the citizens of our state.

Based upon these broad principles, the WCC has identified the following specific areas of interest and concern.

### **Programs Targeted to the Needy**

*We urge you to sustain state support for Medicaid, BadgerCare, Community Aids, the Wisconsin Works program (W-2), other programs funded with medical assistance dollars, and the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, so that families and individuals facing serious crises may continue to receive much needed assistance.*

Any economic downturn imposes pain and suffering. Yet one constant in such difficult times is that those with the least tend to lose the most. A loss of income or savings that poses a temporary inconvenience in some families is often truly devastating to those who were just getting by in better times. Those who were in need of the community's help prior to the current downturn need it even more now. The programs and public benefits that aided them in 2008 will be even more necessary in 2009.

So it is precisely in these difficult times that we must affirm our commitment to the core principles that define who we are as a society. One of these core principles is that the poor have a special claim on the support and assistance of the community, regardless of the circumstances.

## **Criminal Justice Reform Initiative**

*We urge you to accept the Governor's proposals to redirect scarce resources from prisons to community programs for non-violent offenders who are near the end of their sentences.*

The WCC has long favored a shift in emphasis from incarceration to community supervision, counseling, and treatment for non-violent offenders. The Governor's proposals in this area make fiscal and programmatic sense.

## **Milwaukee Parental Choice Program**

*We ask that the provisions relating to accountability of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) be removed from the budget and, if necessary, be considered as separate legislation.*

Catholic educators take accountability seriously. Over the years they have provided parents, parishioners, and the public with good schools and effective means of assuring that they are fulfilling their mission. In the years that Catholic educators have been part of the MPCP, they have collaborated with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and others to meet the accountability standards in the choice program.

The standards currently in force clearly have worked. Over two dozen schools have been removed from the program because they failed to adhere to them.

If the standards need revision, the revision should follow consultation with all the Choice schools as to how they can be modified. And these revisions should be flexible enough to reflect the different mission and structure of the participating schools.

The accountability provisions in the budget present a number of serious problems for Catholic schools. The three mentioned here are among the more serious examples:

1. The testing requirements are incompatible with the curriculum and educational approach of our schools.
2. The requirement that MPCP schools comply with the open meeting law treats schools differently from others who partner with government entities to deliver services. Marquette University, Catholic hospitals, and Catholic Charities agencies all receive government funds in one way or another. The open meeting laws cover none of them. Moreover, governance of Catholic schools rests with the pastor. We believe that, as drafted, the provision would mean that the pastor would have to post nearly every meeting he attends. This is unacceptable.
3. The mandate that schools which close must transfer their records to MPCP within five days might make sense for some schools, but it ignores the fact that records from Catholic schools are transferred to the controlling diocese.

### **Foster Care and Kinship Care**

*We urge you to accept the Governor's recommendation to fund a 5% increase in uniform foster care in each year, and to increase funding for kinship care.*

Foster care and kinship care are vital to children whose parents cannot care for them. Furthermore, we believe that women will be less likely to choose abortion if they know that a strong safety net exists for their children, should they ever need it.

### **W-2 Eligibility for Pregnant Women in Their Third Trimester of Pregnancy**

*We urge inclusion of the provision that extends eligibility to women with no other children who are in the 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester of pregnancy and are not able to work because of a medically verified at-risk pregnancy.*

If women sometimes feel pressured to abort because their health is at risk, then we must support them when they have an at-risk pregnancy. Indeed, we would favor extending such eligibility with at-risk pregnancies even earlier in the pregnancy.

### **W-2 Participants with Newborn Children**

*We urge you to include the provision that permits a woman who has participated in the Wisconsin Works program for at least three months prior to giving birth to remain at home for up to 26 weeks.*

We recognize many new mothers are not able to remain home for 26 weeks. Yet we also recognize that women who need W-2 services must raise children with greater challenges and less support than other mothers of newborns. This provision, like the foster care and kinship supports we mentioned above, is part of a safety net that helps women choose childbirth over abortion, and helps them develop strong bonds with their newborns.

### **BadgerCare Plus Coverage of Childless Adults**

*We urge that this provision be included in the budget.*

The coverage of childless adults will take effect on July 1, 2009, and has the potential to benefit an estimated 41,000 childless adults. Since 1919, the United States Catholic bishops have supported universal access to health care. This program takes us one important step closer to achieving that goal for Wisconsin's residents.

### **BadgerCare Plus Program Eligibility**

*We urge that the term "unborn child" not be deleted from the statute pertaining to program eligibility.*

Any recognition of unborn children in Wisconsin law should be retained, because all human life—no matter at what stage or in what condition it is in—is deserving of recognition, respect, and protection. Retaining the current statutory language also affirms that the unborn child has a claim on health care.

### **Family Planning Waiver for Men**

*We urge the removal of this provision from the budget.*

The budget expands eligibility for services to men who meet the specified qualifications of the Medical Assistance family planning waiver program. The state should not engage in the promotion of artificial contraception, especially when that includes the distribution of contraception to teens without parental knowledge.

### **Domestic Partnerships**

*We urge that this provision be deleted from the budget.*

We recognize that this provision presents a policy debate about how the law should accommodate people who are committed to each other's care, but whom the law prevents from marrying.

Such a debate is complex and not suited to inclusion in a budget. A separate debate outside the budget process could permit a thorough assessment of the plan's intended and unintended impact on the institutions of marriage and family. We need to be sure that such a provision does not have the effect of diluting the unique status that marriage enjoys in our laws.

Supporters of the provision assert that it is not an issue of sexual orientation. In that case, it is legitimate to discuss why the definition of domestic partner excludes other people in familial relationships who are prohibited from marrying.

Such exclusion is problematic. As the Catholic bishops of Washington State observed in a similar debate, in many families, especially in immigrant, multi-language, and racially diverse households, some unmarried family members—siblings, grandchildren, cousins, etc.—make similar commitments to care for each other. As currently worded, the Governor's domestic partner provision would exclude these individuals from equal access to the proposed benefits.

For this and other reasons, this provision should not be included in the budget.