



## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: State Senator Lena Taylor, Chair  
Members, Senate Committee on Judiciary, Corrections, and Housing

FROM: Barbara Sella, Associate Director 

DATE: December 4, 2007

RE: Senate Bill 321—Eligibility for State Public Defenders

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The Wisconsin Catholic Conference thanks you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of Senate Bill 321, which would require the State Public Defender's (SPD) office to raise its eligibility standards and to hire additional staff.

In 1998, Wisconsin's Catholic bishops convened a 15-member Task Force on Corrections to review the state's criminal justice system.

The members of the Task Force included a former Supreme Court Justice; the director of a community program that helps place offenders in jobs and housing; an assistant district attorney for Milwaukee County; an ex-offender; a prison chaplain; a retired county sheriff; a former probation officer; priests who minister to offenders and victims; and several crime victims.

The Task Force heard testimony from Department of Corrections officials; prison inmates; victims of crime; theologians; and advocates for judicial and prison reform.

A year later, in 1999, the bishops published *Public Safety, the Common Good, and the Church: A Statement on Crime and Punishment in Wisconsin*, based on the findings of the Task Force.

In their statement, the bishops recognized that our current judicial system leaves many defendants without access to impartial, independent and speedy justice, even when their life and liberty are at stake.

As the bishops stated, "Criminal justice policies and pastoral responses to crime must take special care to address and serve those with little or no money. Policies must ensure that justice is as accessible to victims and offenders who are poor as it is to those who are more affluent."

One of the major reasons for this lack of access to effective legal counsel is that the indigency standards have not changed since 1987. If the guidelines were to be made consistent with W-2,

as this bill proposes, it is estimated that the SPD could represent an additional 15,400 cases per year.

Wisconsin's Catholic bishops support SB 321, not just because it is in line with our nation's and our state's constitutional right to justice, but also because it is in line with the principles of Catholic social teaching. According to this teaching, the measure of all institutions is the degree to which they either enhance or diminish the life and dignity of every human being, and the degree to which they protect or threaten the poorest and most vulnerable members of our society.

Because SB 321 seeks to protect the legal rights of our state's poorest residents, we respectfully urge you to support it.

Thank you.