

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

THE STATE BUDGET, CHILDREN AND FAMILIES **Senate Committee on Children, Families and Workforce Development** **April 15, 2009**

Presented by John Huebscher, Executive Director

On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), I offer this written testimony on the provisions of the proposed 2009-11 budget as they relate to the well-being of children and families.

Although government budgets are laden with numbers, statistics, and estimates, fundamentally they are about people and the priorities of the community. The state budget is the place where we transform talk about family values into priorities that value families.

Today, the WCC focuses on two concerns regarding the state's budget: 1) Does the budget secure a basic safety net for children and families? 2) Does it enable a woman facing pregnancy to overcome health, fiscal, and other obstacles that may pressure her to choose abortion rather than life?

Securing the Safety Net

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.

And the need is real.

The director of the St. Vincent de Paul office in Madison reports that demand is up by 10% over last quarter. Demand for food is up even more at 12%. He and his staff are seeing many people who haven't come to them before. And he expects things to get worse this summer as unemployment benefits run out.

Leadership of Catholic Charities in the Superior diocese reports:

- The numbers of families coming to his agencies for "first time assistance" continues to increase at approximately 10% per month since October 2008.
- Rent Smart, a program that assists renters to obtain affordable rental housing which meets codes, and the Mortgage Foreclosure Counseling caseload has increased from eleven families in all of 2007 to ninety-four in 2008.

- The Emergency Family Shelter in Superior (Harbor House, operated by Faith United Methodist Church) is at capacity and has been since last summer.
- Food shelves, regardless of location, throughout the sixteen county service area of Catholic Charities are struggling to keep enough food on hand for the increased participation.

So it is precisely in these difficult times that Wisconsin must affirm its 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.

On this score we offer the following:

Federal Title IV-E funds. The WCC is deeply concerned that a failure to mitigate the loss of federal Title IV-E funds will have a serious and significant impact on county and other human services agencies, including Catholic Charities agencies, and their efforts to help families in need of child welfare and other assistance. Restoring most, if not all, of this lost revenue is critical to sustaining programs for needy families.

Revisions to the Wisconsin Works (W-2) Program. The programs that W-2 replaced were often criticized as a one-size-fits-all approach to helping needy families. It is appropriate to ask whether these same flaws are present in today's W-2 system.

However one feels about the changes W-2 made in our approach to helping needy families, we can agree that the Wisconsin of today is much different than the Wisconsin of the mid-1990s when W-2 was launched. Then the economy was stronger, unemployment was low and dropping, and job options were greater.

None of that is true today. Rising unemployment and a struggling economy make it harder to find the kind of employment that will allow a person to exit the W-2 program.

Those who help W-2 clients see this first hand.

Again, Catholic Charities in Superior reports that the "last hired, first fired" have been joined by people who have had 20 and 30 years of steady employment and are finding themselves without a job for the first time in their lives. The "last hired, first fired" will remain at the end of the line until there is a complete recovery.

In light of this, Catholic Charities in Superior makes a compelling case that increased flexibility is required in the regulations of W-2, including an extension of time limits and the provision of employment related education, training and transportation programs, as well as child care assistance. Only with these changes will it be possible to truly assist low-income persons from disadvantaged educational backgrounds to meaningfully participate in the job market.

The director of St. Vincent de Paul in Madison says the same thing and he sees it from both sides. Not only do W-2 clients come to him for help but he also employs some of them in his

agency. And he has to report them for noncompliance.

He can't be as lenient with them as he is with his own employees when they miss work due to illness or a sick child. He observed that if he terminated his own staff for the same reasons as W-2 he would have to pay unemployment compensation. He also adds that W-2 access is really difficult. "People are not eligible under the guidelines who clearly should be."

Both agency leaders say the program needs more flexibility.

In today's context, the Governor's proposals provide individuals the time needed to find sustainable jobs. These provisions make sense and are the decent thing to do.

Affirming Life Over Abortion

Many of you have told me that there are ways to be pro-life without renewing the debate over the legality of abortion. We believe that women will be less likely to choose abortion if they know that a strong safety net exists for them and their children, should they ever need it.

In some small but important ways, the budget accomplishes this.

Foster Care and Kinship Care. Foster care and kinship care are vital to children whose parents cannot care for them. The annual 5% increase in uniform foster care rates and an increase in funding for kinship care will foster pro-life choices. So will investing more than \$1 million over the next two years to fund a statewide foster parent-training program.

W-2 Eligibility for Pregnant Women in Their Third Trimester of Pregnancy. Any woman who encounters a health risk while pregnant endures a significant burden, both emotionally and physically. However, the pressure of such a pregnancy is made even more difficult when compounded by concerns that a woman will not be able to meet her basic needs and those of her unborn child. Extending W-2 eligibility to women with no other children who are in the 3rd trimester of pregnancy and are not able to work because of a medically verified at-risk pregnancy offers much needed support to women at a time of crisis. Indeed, we would favor extending such eligibility to all women of limited means facing at-risk pregnancies.

Time at Home for W-2 Participants with Newborn Children. The value of life is also affirmed by the provision that permits a woman who has participated in the W-2 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 others. This provision, like the foster care and kinship supports mentioned above, is part of a safety net that helps women choose childbirth over abortion and helps them develop strong bonds with their newborns.

These provisions are "pro-life" in that they not only assist women in need of help, but also aid their children. These provisions also speak to young girls who, though years away from becoming mothers themselves, take note of how we as a community respond to the needs of

pregnant women. If young women come of age in a culture that respects life and truly nurtures it, then they may be more inclined to choose life themselves when confronted with difficult circumstances.

Conclusion

We don't envy you the hard choices you must make in the weeks ahead. However, those choices must continue to recognize a "preferential option" for the poor among us. We hope as you make these difficult decisions, you do so in ways that value families, especially those with vital needs made more difficult by our current economic troubles. Our greatness as a society can and will be measured by how we promote the good of those most vulnerable to the pressures of our age.