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Agencies protest proposed cuts in programs for poor

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LANSING - Michigan's safety net is already in tatters, and proposed cuts in state programs for the poor are unjustified and immoral, a group of service agencies said at a state Capitol news conference this morning.

The group, headed by the Michigan Catholic Conference and Michigan League for Human Services, called on Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the Legislature to find alternatives to proposed reductions in an array of services for poor families, foster children and the elderly.

"We are strongly expressing our opposition to balancing the budget on the backs of the poor," said Catholic Conference Vice President Paul Long.

In the midst of a deep recession is "the worst possible time to be considering these cuts," said MLHS President Sharon Parks.

The group was less united on alternatives to social service program cuts to address the state's looming \$1.8-billion deficit in 2010. Representatives from many of the agencies said they would support higher taxes. But there was no consensus on how that should be done. Many of those in attendance at today's news conference said they would support doubling the state beer tax and hiking cigarette taxes again, taxes that are paid disproportionately by poor people.

But Long said, "We're not here to tell (Granholm and the lawmakers) what they should do. We're telling them, 'Don't shred the safety net.'"

It remains unclear what programs for the poor are slated for reduction or elimination, as budget negotiations continue at the Capitol and an Oct. 1 deadline for reaching an agreement grows closer. Granholm's budget director, Robert Emerson, said today that the talks are "not moving very fast."

Also at the Capitol this morning was a surprisingly large turnout of demonstrators, protesting Granholm's order to dismantle the Michigan Library as part of restructuring of state government. Several hundred genealogists said the library is an essential resource for families and communities interested in the heritage of the families and the state.

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