

Michigan Catholic Conference



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11 April 2011

The Honorable Rick Snyder
Governor of Michigan
P.O. Box 30013
Lansing, Michigan 48909

The Honorable Randy Richardville
Senate Majority Leader
P.O. Box 30036
Lansing, Michigan 48909-7536

The Honorable James “Jase” Bolger
Speaker of the House
P.O. Box 30014
Lansing, Michigan 48933

The Honorable Gretchen Whitmer
Senate Minority Leader
P.O. Box 30036
Lansing, Michigan 48909-7536

The Honorable Richard E. Hammel
House Minority Leader
P.O. Box 30014
Lansing, Michigan 48909-7514

Dear Governor Snyder and Legislative Leaders:

We, the Roman Catholic Bishops of the seven Dioceses in Michigan, take this opportunity as proposals are being advanced by our legislators to craft the state budget, to call on you, our executive and legislative leaders, to carry out your responsibilities with greater attention to the needs of the poor, the unemployed and other vulnerable persons who make up a large part of the citizens of Michigan. It is a well-known fact that a very clear indicator of the moral strength of any society is in the way its neediest citizens are treated. As such, budget priorities reflect significant moral choices. As moral leaders of the citizens of our state, we have reasonable cause for serious concern based on the Fiscal Year 2012 and Projected Fiscal Year 2013 Executive Budget Recommendation, along with proposals that are currently under consideration in the Legislature.

Various policy proposals addressed in committee and others that have been put forward, if enacted, would adversely impact the state’s destitute and working poor population and will likely create additional hardships for those for whom we are collectively responsible – you as elected leaders, and we, the spiritual leaders, of the people of this state. Those proposals include:

- Eliminating the Michigan Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). The research of the staff of the Michigan Catholic Conference reports that the EITC does more to lift working families and their children out of poverty than any other policy. According to the Michigan Dashboard, there are only 12 states in the country with more children living in poverty than Michigan. This is an alarming statistic that has rightly been brought to the state’s attention, and is among the reasons why the Michigan Catholic Conference has made preserving the state EITC its number one advocacy priority this legislative session. Any reforms of the EITC should improve the conditions of the working poor and not worsen them.

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- Reforming the Family Independence Program by instituting a 48-month hard deadline for public assistance, and amending the penalty for a third occasion of noncompliance from a one year prohibition to a lifetime ban. State data indicates upward of 12,000 families will be immediately cut from assistance if the 48-month hard deadline takes effect. A lifetime ban also fails to take into consideration those who do find gainful employment, but later find themselves in desperate need of assistance due to subsequent job loss or any other unforeseen circumstance. Any reform should assist individuals to find work and not provide wider cracks through which more people can fall.
- Eliminating from basic assistance programs those with past drug-related offenses. While the motivation for this proposal is unclear, since funds for this policy are derived from the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families policy, one must foresee, for example, the life-threatening and false choice presented to a poor woman who is no longer eligible for public assistance – and becomes pregnant. In addition, as we seek to reduce our prison population, we need to do more to help those who have misused drugs to find greater stability in life not less.

While this is not an exhaustive list of proposals that merit a renewed attention to the needs of the poor and vulnerable, it does represent three areas where the state can uphold its responsibility to maintain policies that serve “the least of these.” Just as we have grave concern that shared sacrifice will unfairly burden those already suffering, we are mindful of the state’s poor economic health over the past decade. In this regard, **we are prepared to be a part of the solution.**

For decades the Catholic Church has operated with professionalism and sound ethical principles a vast and effective network of social services. With statutory changes these agencies, which exist with a mandate to uphold the dignity of every human person, can be better equipped to accept additional foster care, adoption and other social services – thereby reducing the state’s responsibility and helping to eliminate associated costs.

As the state budget debate continues, please know that we, through the staff of the Michigan Catholic Conference, stand ready to assist in your efforts to reform and reinvent Michigan while at the same time ensuring the dignity of all persons in our state, especially the poor and vulnerable.

With deep appreciation for the difficult choices ahead of you, and with ardent prayers for God to bring wisdom and guidance to your deliberations, we are

Respectfully,

Most Reverend Allen H. Vigneron
Archbishop of Detroit

Most Reverend Bernard A. Hebda
Diocese of Gaylord

Most Reverend Walter A. Hurley
Diocese of Grand Rapids

Most Reverend Paul J. Bradley
Diocese of Kalamazoo

Most Reverend Earl Boyea
Diocese of Lansing

Most Reverend Alexander K. Sample
Diocese of Marquette

Most Reverend Joseph R. Cistone
Diocese of Saginaw

cc: Lieutenant Governor Brian Calley
Members of the Michigan Senate
Members of the Michigan House of Representatives
Mr. Andy Dillon, State Treasurer
Mr. John E. Nixon, Director, State Budget and DTMB