News



by Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

JUNEAU, Alaska — July 30, 2019
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The $444 million cut from Alaska's $8.3-billion state operating budget that took effect July 1 is having "a direct negative impact on the most poor and vulnerable in our state," said Alaska's Catholic bishops.

Saying "first principle of Catholic social teaching is to support the life and dignity of the human person," the bishops in a July 26 statement said Catholic social services agencies, "along with other faith-based denominations and private nonprofits, can barely keep up with the current needs of people who live on the margins."

In the statement, titled "In Defense of the Poor and Vulnerable," they said that as the state's Catholic bishops, "we are called to advocate and defend or speak against government policies and programs that directly affect the lives and dignity of the poor and vulnerable."

"We call upon all our elected officials to restore funds to agencies and services that provide for the needs of our children, our elders, the poor, the vulnerable and the homeless," they said.

"We ask Alaskans to reach out and contact their elected officials in support of restoring funds for services to the poor and vulnerable in our state," they added.

The statement was signed by Bishop Andrew E. Bellisario of Juneau, which is the state capital; Bishop Chad W. Zielinski of Fairbanks; and retired Archbishop Roger L. Schwietz of Anchorage.

"Across Alaska, thousands of low-income families now face new struggles through funding cuts to agencies that operate food pantries, shelter programs, and early childhood education," the bishops said. "The millions of dollars cut statewide to homeless services will force the most vulnerable onto the streets. Cuts to senior housing grants and to the senior benefits program adversely affect our elders."

Republican Gov. Mike Dunleavy made the budget cuts through line-item vetoes, telling reporters earlier this year sacrifices were needed to resolve an expected deficit of $1.6 billion for the 2019-2020 fiscal year. AP quoted him as saying: "This budget is going to impact all Alaskans."

Much of the funding was cut for food banks, senior citizens and the public university system, which had its budget cut by 41%. Medicaid reductions mean health care providers also will receive less revenue, so workers are expected to be laid off.

Advertisement

In their statement, the bishops gave examples of how budget cuts for social services will be felt, citing how Br. Francis Shelter in Anchorage will be forced to reduce its capacity from 240 beds to 100.

"Where will the other 140-plus homeless go?" they asked. "The shelter has now closed during the day to cut costs, forcing more people to wander the streets."

They pointed to the impact on Clare House, also in Anchorage, which provides shelter to 90 at-risk women with children and to expectant mothers 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"(It) will be forced to reduce services to nighttime only. Where will these moms and their children go?" the bishops asked. "Currently the shelter also provides day care for their children allowing these women to work."

"We must not forget the many dedicated employees and volunteers working at all our social service agencies throughout Alaska," the bishops continued. "They are an

important part of the solution in assisting people to move out of poverty.

"We need to support these dedicated servants of the poor, not penalize them by laying them off from their jobs. After all, they work on our behalf," they said. "They assist those who are clinging to the last rung of the ladder in our society, many of whom, without assistance, have only to look forward to destitution and despair."

The Alaska bishops pledged to "continue to do our part to fund our agencies as best we can with our resources, our time and our talent, together with all those willing to support us."

"We will continue to collaborate with our local and state governments because we realize it is all of us, working together, who contribute to the solution of taking care of the most vulnerable in our state," they added.