

Don't balance budgets on backs of poor, urge bishops

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Feb. 14, 2011



Allison Bleakley is surrounded by signs during a June 18, 2009 rally held in Aurora, Ill. to protest government cutbacks in social services. (CNS photo/John Gress, Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- Catholic bishops around the country are reminding state legislatures and their fellow citizens that the nation's budgetary problems are not over and must not be resolved on the backs of the poor.

"In the devastation of shrinking city and state budgets across the country, all face excruciating choices," said the Massachusetts bishops in one of the most recent statements, issued Feb. 9. "But we caution that while the temptation to turn away from the growing social needs confronting our cities and towns may seem attractive ... our capacity to move beyond the many complex problems we face today depends on our willingness to overcome that temptation."

The heads of Massachusetts' four Catholic dioceses said their statement, titled "Standing in Solidarity With All," involved a pledge and a plea.

"Our pledge is that we will do all we can as bishops to enable institutions -- parishes, Catholic Charities, health care facilities and schools -- to continue to do their best in extending help to our neighbors in need," they said. "Our plea is that in the decisions facing our elected officials, and in the discussions and actions of all citizens, there be preserved, for the sake of human dignity, a special place and regard for the vulnerable."

That pledge and plea were being made across the country by bishops or their representatives in statements and testimony about states' efforts to balance their budgets.

Many echoed the message delivered by Jennifer Allmon, associate director of the Texas Catholic Conference, in Feb. 2 testimony before the Senate Finance Committee on behalf of the state's 15 active Catholic bishops: "The charitable community in Texas does not have the capacity to absorb the needs created" by state budget cuts.

She said the conference, which represents the state's bishops on public policy matters, "supports a balanced approach to solving the revenue shortfall, including seeking new revenue to adequately fund needed public services and to prepare Texas for the future."

Before reducing public services, Allmon said, Texas officials should use all of the state's Rainy Day Fund; "maximize use of available federal funding without extending funding for immoral medical procedures or research"; and create new revenue sources "that are equitable and can grow along with the growth in need for public services."

In Michigan, Paul A. Long, president and CEO of the Michigan Catholic Conference, spoke out Feb. 9 against proposed legislation that would eliminate the state's Earned Income Tax Credit, which he called "a pro-family, pro-work policy that reduces poverty, increases workforce participation among low-income families, and makes the state tax system fairer by offsetting disproportionate payroll taxes."

"While not unexpected, it is terribly unfortunate and alarming that the first target of this year's budget deficit may be low-income working families living paycheck to paycheck," Long said. "Michigan's low-income workers should not bear the burden of setting straight the state's fiscal house."

In California, Catholic Charities agencies across the state joined in marking Feb. 3 as the start of a month of poverty awareness and education activities under the umbrella of Step Up California, a campaign challenging Californians to help those in need through volunteerism and charitable giving to service organizations such as food banks, homeless shelters and job development organizations.

Catholic Charities San Bernardino, a founder of Step Up California, staged a community poverty simulation to educate participants about the day-to-day realities of life with a shortage of money and a variety of life challenges and barriers to resources. Other Step Up California activities included a forum on the Earned Income Tax Credit at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Sacramento and tours for legislators of nonprofit direct service agencies.

"California has been a promised land for those seeking gold, good jobs, a better life for their children and freedom from oppression in other parts of the world," said a news release about the campaign. "Agencies providing services to those in poverty have been overwhelmed with an increase in demand for basic services such as food, shelter and help in finding jobs. Not since the Great Depression have we witnessed so many Californians suffering, struggling and desperate."

In its legislative agenda for 2011, the Minnesota Catholic Conference expressed fears "for how the next round of budget cutting may impact health and human services" after the state "already used up one-time solutions" and reduced services in past legislatures.

The state's bishops back the recommendations of the Legislative Commission to End Poverty and support "an increase in tax revenue should it become necessary," the conference said.

Declaring that "some services are not negotiable in a just society," the conference said, "It is not enough to provide a safety net; we must find a way out of that net to ensure that those in need are given the means to provide adequate employment, housing, food and health care for themselves and their dependents."

The policy positions outlined by the Maryland Catholic Conference for the 2011 legislative session offered a similar perspective.

"Greater charity is needed for the vulnerable who often struggle through no fault of their own," the conference said. "We support policies in solidarity with the most economically vulnerable: the unemployed, the poor and homeless, single mothers, persons with disabilities, and immigrants who are new to this land."

Specifically, the Maryland bishops urged the preservation of state funding for essential safety-net programs and

the restoration of "funding and front-line staff within the Department of Human Resources to meet the skyrocketing demand for services."

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