

New Jersey Catholic Conference

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FY'10 State Budget Testimony

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The New Jersey Catholic Conference, speaks for the Catholic Bishops of New Jersey, appreciates the opportunity to comment on the State FY 2010 Budget. Our response to the budget is guided by the Church's teachings and moral principles which remind us to give special consideration to the poor and vulnerable and to make their needs our top priority in public life. It is especially important during this economic downturn that we pay close attention to protecting programs that will provide families with basic needs such as food, housing; access to healthcare, and social services.

“Economic decisions have human consequences and moral content; they help or hurt people, strengthen or weaken family life advance or diminish the quality of justice...”¹ At the beginning of the economic downturn in 2008, Catholic Charities agencies began to see a 20 percent increase in the number of people seeking request for financial assistance, help with utilities, mortgage, rental or temporary housing, and request for food assistance. This rapidly rose to 40 percent increase putting a strain on staff and financial resources.

During the same time they are facing flat funding from state government, reduction in individual donations and other resources. The need is beginning to outpace available resources and will continue to grow at a time when it is increasingly clear that large numbers of the working poor and middle class are at risk.

Our job as advocates, policymakers and legislators is to look at the FY 2010 budget and measure it by how it touches human life and whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person. We must ensure the basic human needs of the residents of New Jersey are met.

The New Jersey Catholic Conference is heartened that as Governor Corzine sought to make cuts and balance the budget, his proposed budget for FY'10 has preserved programs that provide basic human needs in housing, food assistance, utility assistance and healthcare for children. The FY'10 Budget builds upon some of those initial investments to reduce poverty established in previous State budgets. Now more than ever your support for the continued funding for NJ FamilyCare, Food Banks and NJ Shares is essential.

Reduce Hunger by continuing your support for the State Food Purchase Program and the School Breakfast program. Support the increase of Food Stamp eligibility to 185% of the federal poverty level. Food stamps serves as a front-line defense against recession, helping families to make ends meet and bringing federal dollars into local communities during difficult economic times.

¹ Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy

Prevent Homelessness by maintaining the State Rental Assistance Program (S-RAP).

Combat Abuse and Neglect of our Children by supporting adequate funding of the Department of Children and Families (DCF), especially in the area of prevention.

Maintain Access to Quality and Affordable HealthCare for both children (up to 350% FPL) and parents (up to 200% FPL). Ensuring families have access to affordable healthcare is the best strategy for curtailing healthcare cost in the future.

While we support many of Governor Corzine's proposals we are very concerned about impact the Governor's proposal for Medicaid Co-Pay will have on those most in need. **We urge you to eliminate the institution of Medicaid co-pays for prescription.** Co-pays simply make healthcare less affordable for individuals with limited incomes. A person already faced with having to make choices between eating and paying the rent will make a choice to do without the prescription or reduce usage, both actions can have severe consequences for someone with a serious or catastrophic illness.

This budget is difficult, but it is also an opportunity for us to shape a society that better protects the dignity and basic rights of our brothers and sisters. Through the cooperation and support of many partners, especially the support of government at all levels; we can create the conditions for the justice that is demanded of us. Thank you for your attention.