

April 22, 2009

Good afternoon. I am Chris Leifeld, Executive Director of the Minnesota Catholic Conference . We lobby on behalf of the Catholic bishops and the Church in Minnesota.

Minnesota's Catholic Bishops are gravely concerned about the impact decisions made here at the capitol regarding the state budget will have on the poor.

On Monday of this week, the nine Catholic bishops of our state sent a letter to members of the state legislature regarding the state budget. I believe a copy of the letter has been distributed.

In the opening of that letter the bishops noted the challenges facing the legislature in addressing the budget shortfall and stated their belief that "Minnesota's budget should uphold the inviolable human dignity, value and worth of every Minnesotan and reflect a commitment to the common good."

They further urged that the legislature to "ensure that our state has sufficient revenue to meet the needs of Minnesotans, especially those among us who are poor and vulnerable."

The bishops voiced specific concern with the cuts being proposed in the Health and Human services budget and that if those services are cut for those in the greatest need, many will be forced to live without basic necessities.

Nearly half-a-million Minnesotans are living below the poverty line, which is less than \$15,000 for a family of 2 and a little over \$22,000 for a family of four. We all know that we are living in very difficult times.

It is within this economic climate and within these struggles that legislators are making proposals to balance Minnesota's budget. On Monday, the House Health Care and Human Services Finance Division released their Omnibus bill (it passed out of Committee yesterday). We are still waiting on the Senate's Omnibus bill. With regards to the House Omnibus bill, we were relieved to see that the House preserved health care coverage for low-income Minnesotans.

However, we still have grave concerns with many of the bill's provisions governing the assistance that Minnesota provides our state's poorest children and families. These cuts include assistance that helps close the gap between very low wages and the cost of essential needs. For example, one proposal in the bill cuts assistance payments to families with a disabled parent or child by \$125 a month. For the majority of these families, the only parent in the household is the parent who is disabled, and is unable to work. The likelihood that the family will be able to replace the cuts with earnings is small. In other words, these cuts will increase the likelihood that children will grow up in permanent and persistent poverty.

In their letter to the legislators, the bishops concluded:

"We believe that resolving the budget deficit through spending cuts alone will do great harm to Minnesotans and our economy. We urge you to support raising sufficient revenue as part of a comprehensive approach to resolving Minnesota's budget shortfall. Catholic social teaching upholds the role of government to assist individuals and communities when they cannot help themselves. In performing this role, the state is fulfilling its moral responsibility to promote the common good."