

February 16, 2010



Good Afternoon Mr. Chair and members of the Committee. My name is Alexandra Fitzsimmons and I am the Policy Director for the Minnesota Catholic Conference. The MCC is the public policy voice of the Catholic Church in Minnesota and represents the dioceses of Crookston, Duluth, St. Cloud, New Ulm, Winona, and the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

I am here today to speak in support of Representative Fritz's bill - House File 453 – which allows more of our hungry neighbors to take advantage of federal benefits by removing the asset limit for food support households. This will help families – including those who have recently lost a job or home – put food on the table.

I would like to approach the importance of this legislation from three different vantages.

### **Minnesota Families are Struggling**

First, Minnesota families are struggling. Every member of this Committee knows that full well, and likely has hundreds of stories about our neighbors who have lost their jobs, homes or health insurance and are fighting to provide themselves and their families with basic needs. There is no more basic human need than food. Every person has a right to life and to the material and support required to live a truly human existence. The right to life includes the right to food and nutrition to sustain life and to enable a person to develop in dignity. Hunger impacts families by interfering with the ability of children to learn and develop, and oftentimes forces parents to sacrifice essentials in order to provide sufficient food for their families. Hunger diminishes the lives of our neighbors throughout Minnesota and demands an immediate response from our State.

According to a recent report released by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), in 2009 nearly 14 percent of households in Minnesota reported not having enough money to buy the food they needed during the prior twelve months for themselves or their families. According to the report, seven of Minnesota's eight Congressional Districts had more than one in ten residents reporting food hardship during 2008-2009. Minnesota's food hardship rate ranged from 9.3% in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District (Erik Paulsen's District) to 17.4% in the 8<sup>th</sup> Congressional District (James Oberstar's District).

Second Harvest Heartland witnessed a 54.4% increase in demand for emergency food assistance when comparing January through June 2008 to January through June 2009.<sup>1</sup> In September 2009,

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<sup>1</sup> Survey conducted by Feeding America during September 2009 on how current economic conditions are impacting the emergency food system served by Second Harvest Heartland

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the 980 plus food shelves and programs that Second Harvest Heartland works with reported that requests for emergency food were up 50% over 2008. Furthermore, according to Second Harvest Heartland, unemployment, underemployment and the cost of health care were the main contributing factors to the substantial increased need for emergency food.

### **Asset Limits are Inconsistent with Minnesota's**

Second, asset limits are inconsistent with Minnesota's emphasis on work and self-reliance, and punish the very families that are trying to maintain or achieve economic independence by building their savings. Forcing individuals to spend down *long-term* savings to qualify for *short-term* assistance leaves individuals and families more vulnerable in the future. By reforming the asset limit for food support, Minnesota can take a significant step towards encouraging, and allowing, our neighbors to save and build for the future. As you know, the current asset limit for the food support program is \$7,000. This amount oftentimes represents needed funds to pay rent, a mortgage payment or health care needs.

### **Charity and Justice**

Lastly, I would briefly like to address two values – charity and justice. These two complementary values – charity and justice – can be powerful responses to human need, including hunger and food insecurity. Many responses to human suffering are a combination of both charity and justice. Many people define charity in terms of giving direct aid, and justice in terms of correcting structures. The dividing line between them is often blurred. I am addressing both charity and justice with you today, because charity cannot adequately address the needs of our many food insecure neighbors. However, justice can.

Please support House File 453 and help more Minnesotans put food on the table. Thank you for your time and your commitment to Minnesotans – especially those of us with the greatest needs.

*Charity is commendable; everyone should be charitable. But justice aims to create a social order in which, if individuals choose not to be charitable, people still don't go hungry, unschooled or sick without care. Charity depends on the vicissitudes of whim and personal wealth; justice depends on commitment instead of circumstance. Faith-based charity provides crumbs from the table; faith-based justice offers a place at the table. – Bill Moyers*