

Senate Health and Human Services Budget Committee: Governor's Proposed Budget

February 23, 2010



Thank you Madame 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, representing the dioceses of Crookston, Duluth, New Ulm, St. Cloud, Winona and the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Minnesota's budget is a moral document. The way we balance our state's income and expenditures speaks volumes about the quality of justice in our community. All people have a fundamental human right to the basic material necessities that are required to live with dignity. Our community has a special obligation to ensure that our sisters and brothers with the greatest needs are not denied these basic economic rights. Food, shelter, health care, employment, education – these are so fundamental that they are human rights. The protection of these rights takes precedence over other competing social and economic claims. This is the type of moral framework that should govern the difficult budget decisions that lie ahead for our State.

We do not question the fact that the budget debate must deal with difficult economic realities. We cannot accept, however, the assumption that budget cuts are the only acceptable way to respond to the \$1.2 billion deficit. By relying almost exclusively on budget cuts, Governor Pawlenty's budget would ultimately mean reductions in programs that are essential to our neighbors who are the poorest and most vulnerable.

Many of the Governor's proposed \$347 million in cuts to health and human services will have destructive effects on our neighbors who are already struggling. In the interests of time, I will briefly touch upon two of the Governor's harmful proposals. First, the elimination of the General Assistance program. This critical safety-net program provides needed assistance to Minnesotans who are unable to work. This cut would be devastating to our 19,000 neighbors who rely on the meager \$203 they receive from GA per month. Without this monthly income, our poorest and most vulnerable neighbors will not have access to other income. It is important to note that many Minnesotans who receive GA are homeless. Not only are we called to consider the human impact of each and every economic decision, but we are called to place first, and never last, our sisters and brothers with the greatest needs. Like the elimination of GAMC last session, targeting Minnesotans whose voices oftentimes are not heard as loudly as their needs would speak is unjust.

Second, reducing eligibility for MinnesotaCare from 250 percent of the federal poverty guidelines to 75 percent of FPG for adults without children. This change in eligibility would end health care coverage for approximately 21,500 working Minnesotans who do not have access to

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affordable health care through their employer. The savings to the Health Care Access Fund (HCAF) from this change in eligibility would then be transferred to the General Fund to help balance our State's budget deficit. This is unacceptable. Access to affordable health care is a basic human right. As such, we cannot jeopardize the health and well-being of our neighbors in order to balance our State's budget. Our economy must serve people, not the other way around.

Our state budget defines what we as a community value, and also what we don't. In the coming months, all of us must work together to ensure that the current budget deficit does not become an excuse for ignoring or denying the pressing needs of our neighbors with the greatest needs.

Thank you for your time and your dedication to strengthening the common good for all Minnesotans.