



*Office of the President*

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Most Reverend William S. Skylstad, D.D.  
Bishop of Spokane

December 13, 2005

United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative:

Last February in my capacity as President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I wrote asking you to give priority attention to the needs of poor and vulnerable people as you developed a budget for our nation. Congress is now nearing completion of the budget with reconciliation bills that reflect not only economic policy preferences but basic moral choices as well. As Congress prepares to resolve the differences between the House and Senate versions of the spending reconciliation package, I wish to express deep concerns and disappointment on the impact of certain proposed cuts on our most vulnerable brothers and sisters. At the same time, the Bishops' Conference is grateful that both bills take steps toward helping those who have suffered due to Hurricane Katrina.

In my previous letter, I urged you on behalf of the Bishops' Conference to develop a budget plan that would guarantee adequate funding to assist those who are struggling to move beyond welfare, to educate their children, to gain access to health care or to overcome hunger and homelessness. Unfortunately, the budget proposal developed by the House of Representatives includes provisions that fall well short of that standard. We urge you to choose the Senate's approach, and not include these provisions in the final bill.

We urge you to oppose harmful cuts to the **Food Stamp program** included in the House bill that will result in taking food away from children and others who are being helped now. According to the Congressional Budget Office the House proposal would result in over 250,000 children and adults losing access to Food Stamps. Just under one-third of those would be legal permanent residents who will lose eligibility if the five year waiting period is extended by two years. The Bishops' Conference strongly supported President Bush's successful effort to expand access to Food Stamps for legal immigrants in the last farm bill. We strongly oppose retreating by making legal immigrants wait an additional two years for eligibility.

The Bishops' Conference strongly recognizes and affirms the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. Access to adequate health care is a basic human right and an essential measure of respect for human life and dignity. No one should be denied access to needed health care because of the inability to pay. Allowing states to increase the burden of copayments, deductibles and premiums on **Medicaid beneficiaries**—including some children and pregnant women – and to erode federal standards of core benefits will have that effect. We urge you to reject including these proposals from the House bill in the final package. Attempts to save money by making it harder for low-income and vulnerable people to get the health care they need is simply unacceptable.

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The House bill also includes provisions to reauthorize the **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families** (TANF) welfare program. The Conference has not supported earlier iterations of the House TANF proposal because of concerns about how it could impact low-income families and children, given that it increases work requirements, including for mothers of children under 6 years old; fails to provide sufficient child care funding; and fails to restore TANF benefit eligibility to recently-arrived legal immigrants. TANF reauthorization should be considered on its own terms to allow full review of these and other important policy decisions, instead of including it in a budget-cutting exercise.

The House bill, by cutting federal funding for **state child support services**, will make it harder for states to collect child support for low and moderate-income families and result in \$21 billion less in child support being collected for children and families than under current law, according to the Congressional Budget Office. This proposal is not good for children or families, and we urge you to reject it. Child support payments are crucial to the economic viability of some families, keeping them out of poverty and off public programs. They can also encourage parental responsibility and help to maintain the connection between children and their non-custodial parent.

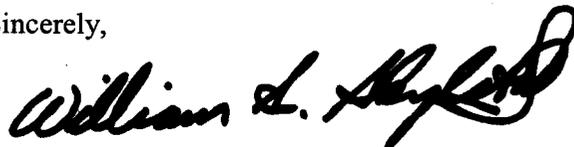
In addition to these areas where we ask you to follow the Senate bill, we are concerned with the approach both bills take in important areas of **agriculture policy**. First, the bishops have stated that protecting God's creation must be a central goal of agricultural policies, and we support programs that promote soil conservation, improve water quality, protect wildlife, and maintain biodiversity. We oppose proposals in both bills to reduce spending on key **agriculture conservation programs**.

Second, we are also deeply disappointed that neither bill begins the process of **limiting U.S. farm supports and targeting them to those who need them the most** -- small and moderate-sized farms facing periodic price shocks or unpredictable natural disasters. Such a policy is needed so poor farmers around the world can sell their products and support their families, and to help family farms remain competitive in a volatile market.

Finally, the Bishops' Conference is pleased that both the House and Senate bills call for 100% federal financing for **health care for victims of Katrina**. The House provision goes farther than the Senate bill, providing for full federal Medicaid funding not only for Katrina victims and evacuees, wherever they now live, but for all residents of Louisiana, Mississippi and the most-affected counties in Alabama. We urge you to support the more generous House language.

The federal budget is more than a matter of accounting: it reflects our values and priorities as a nation. The budget choices you make in the coming days will directly affect the lives of real people, especially "the least of these" in our midst. This is a time for a genuinely bipartisan commitment to focus on the common good of all, and on the special needs of the poor and vulnerable in particular. On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I urge you to make that commitment by working for a budget that does not neglect the needs of the most vulnerable among us.

Sincerely,



Most Reverend William S. Skylstad  
Bishop of Spokane  
President