



Department of Social Development and World Peace

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November 2, 2005

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

When Congress began the process of developing the 2006 budget for the United States government last February, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops president, Bishop William Skylstad, urged Members of Congress to remember that budget “decisions will reflect not only economic policies but moral choices as well,” and urged Congress “to give priority attention in the budget to the needs of poor and vulnerable people both here and abroad.”

As the Senate now works on passing its budget reconciliation bill, we write to reiterate the Conference’s priorities and to share our views on how that bill may impact several key programs and the people they serve. These views are based upon our application of Catholic teaching to these key policy choices that affect those in need.

We are pleased that the budget reconciliation proposal forwarded by the Senate Finance Committee does not allow for increases in Medicaid beneficiary premiums, co-pays and deductibles, and maintains both a federal standard of core benefits, necessary for the maintenance of good health to which all Medicaid beneficiaries are entitled, and the basic structure of the program. We urge that these positions be maintained in the final bill, and that the Senate accept no other Medicaid program changes that could cause anyone who relies on Medicaid for his or her health care to lose coverage or access to vital services.

Another provision of the Senate reconciliation bill provides for 100 percent federal payments for Medicaid-eligible Katrina victims. The bishops’ conference supports this move, and also supports providing health care coverage to low-income Katrina survivors regardless of categorical eligibility under Medicaid and streamlining Medicaid eligibility and enrollment procedures to facilitate access to care for many Katrina victims. We must make sure that victims of Hurricane Katrina can receive the medical care they need.

The Senate budget reconciliation instructions also called for reducing spending in programs under the jurisdiction of the Agriculture Committee, including the Food Stamp program, conservation programs and farm support programs. Any cuts to the Food Stamp program would require reducing benefit levels or removing families from the program. We are pleased that the reconciliation bill before you does not include any cuts to this essential safety-net program, and strongly urge Senators to oppose any efforts to cut the Food Stamp program or further restrict access to refugees or legal immigrants, at each step of the reconciliation process.

However, we are disappointed that the reconciliation package reduces spending on key conservation programs. The bishops have stated that protecting God's creation must be a central goal of agricultural policies, and our conference supports policies that promote soil conservation, improve water quality, protect wildlife, and maintain biodiversity.

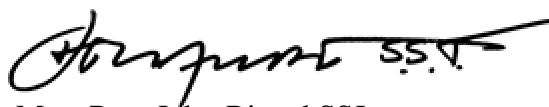
The bishops' conference also endorses targeting limited government resources for direct federal payments and other forms of domestic agricultural support to small and moderate-sized farms, to help them through difficult times caused by periodic price shocks or unpredictable natural disasters, such as the recent hurricanes. Limiting U.S. farm supports and targeting them to those who need them the most would also increase the possibility that poor farmers around the world would be able to sell their products and support their families. We would welcome efforts to begin the process of reconsidering the structure of our farm policy in the context of the reconciliation bill. For example, we understand that Senators Grassley and Dorgan may offer an amendment to lower the limit on the amount of direct federal funding any single entity may receive. We support this policy change.

Once again, we urge you to remember that the federal budget is more than a fiscal plan; it reflects our values as a people. Your budget choices have clear moral and human dimensions. In these difficult times, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops urges you to work for a budget that does not neglect the needs of the "least of these" in our nation and the world.

Sincerely in Christ,



Most Rev. Nicholas DiMarzio
Bishop of Brooklyn
Chairman
Domestic Policy Committee



Most Rev. John Ricard SSJ
Bishop of Pensacola-Tallahassee
Chairman
International Policy Committee