



Department of Social Development and World Peace

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 • FAX 202-541-3339
WEBSITE: WWW.USCCB.ORG/SDWP

November 8, 2005

United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative :

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 House now takes up 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. We are guided by Catholic moral principles: respect for human life and dignity; the importance of family and the value of work; an option for the poor and the call to participation; and the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. We also draw upon the Church’s experience living with, and serving the poor among us. As perhaps the largest non-governmental provider of health care and human services to vulnerable people, the Catholic community meets the poor in our soup kitchens, Catholic Charities agencies and health care facilities.

We are deeply disappointed by the budget reconciliation proposal before the House of Representatives, in particular, its lack of concern for children. Below are specific examples of programs that serve vulnerable people—often children—that will lose funds if this legislation passes in its current form.

Food Stamp Program: The House reconciliation bill includes harmful cuts to the Food Stamp program that will result in taking food away from people, including children, who are being helped now. This would be objectionable anytime, but it is particularly unfair at this time. Recently, USDA reported an increase to 38 million in the number of Americans suffering from hunger or living in homes that are on the edge of hunger. This includes nearly 14 million children. Nearly 300,000 people in low-income working families will lose Food Stamp assistance if this bill becomes law and some 40,000 children in those families will no longer be eligible for free school meals. Many of those denied Food Stamps will be legal immigrants. We were strong supporters of President Bush’s successful effort to expand access to Food Stamps for legal immigrants in the last farm bill. We strongly oppose the effort to roll back this expansion, by making legal immigrants wait an additional two years for eligibility.

Health Care for the Poor: We recognize and affirm the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death and consider access to adequate health care to be a basic human right. No

person should be denied access to needed health care because of inability to pay. We oppose the provisions in the bill that would allow states to increase the burden of co-payments, deductibles and premiums on Medicaid beneficiaries—including some children and pregnant women. Health care providers would be allowed to deny services to those who cannot pay these amounts. Another proposal would allow states wide latitude to choose which medical services it will offer to different groups of low-income people. It is important to maintain a federal standard of core benefits, necessary for the maintenance of good health, to which all Medicaid beneficiaries are entitled.

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that these provisions will save \$6.2 billion over five years (and \$28.2 billion over ten years), precisely because they will cause people eligible for Medicaid to get less of the health care they need. This attempt to save money by making it harder for low-income and vulnerable people to get the health care they need is simply unacceptable.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families: The House reconciliation bill includes the House bill to reauthorize the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) welfare program. We reiterate our concern that the House approach to TANF reauthorization increases the work requirements on all TANF recipients, generally single mothers, and repeals the rule allowing a lower work requirement for mothers of children under 6 years old. While the House reconciliation bill does include small increases in child care funding, the amount is insufficient to pay for current child care services given inflation, let alone cover the need for additional child care created by increasing the TANF work requirements. We are also disappointed that the bill does not restore TANF benefit eligibility to recently-arrived legal immigrants. However, we note our support for funding programs—separate from the basic block grant—to promote marriage and healthy families (although we believe it would be better to target this spending on marriage and family services for low-income families).

Child Support Funds: The House reconciliation bill cuts Federal funding for state child support services which will make it harder for states to collect child support for low and moderate-income families. According to CBO estimates, over the course of ten years families could receive \$21 billion less in child support payments. Child support payments can be crucial to the economic viability of some families, keeping them out of poverty and off public programs. They also encourage parental responsibility and can help to maintain the connection between children and their non-custodial parent. Undermining the collection of child support is not good for children or families.

Agricultural Programs: We are disappointed that the reconciliation bill 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.

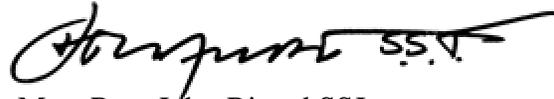
The bishops' conference also endorses targeting limited government resources for direct federal payments and other forms of domestic agricultural support to small and moderate-sized farms, to help them through difficult times caused by periodic price shocks or unpredictable natural disasters, such as 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 redirecting agricultural subsidies to those most in need.

We urge you to remember that the federal budget is more than a fiscal plan; it reflects our values as a people. Budget choices have clear moral and human dimensions. A just society is one that protects and promotes the fundamental rights of its members—with special attention to meeting the basic needs, including the need for safe and affordable health care, of the poor and underserved. 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