

Protecting the Poor from the Fiscal Cliff: A Call from Catholic Human Service Providers in the Cincinnati Archdiocese for a “Circle of Protection” in the Federal Budget

Under the leadership of Archbishop Dennis M. Schnurr, the undersigned Catholic human service agencies of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati¹, join together to reiterate the call of our U.S. Catholic bishops to U.S. Senators and Representatives to establish a “circle of protection” around programs that help the poor in current federal budget negotiations. Our bishops have stated that it is in our nation’s best interest to address the impact of long-term deficits on the health of the economy and on future generations and to use limited resources efficiently and effectively. However, this important goal must not be achieved at the expense of the dignity of the poor and vulnerable at home and abroad.²

We believe that Catholics in the Archdiocese can offer a unique and powerful message by their loving example to aid the most vulnerable and serving people in need. Together, we provide food, shelter, prescription drugs, and emergency assistance to the poor; provide emergency assistance in times of disaster; protect the lives of the unborn; offer adoption services and parenting classes; and foster the health of mothers, children, and families. We deliver counseling to those in crisis; job skills training for the unemployed; educational programs for youth; and mental health services for the abused, neglected, and developmentally disabled. We also help migrants integrate into our communities, settle refugees fleeing persecution in other lands, and support the work of the U.S. Catholic Church overseas as it provides humanitarian relief and sustainable development to the world’s poorest.

Combined, our Catholic human service agencies served over 415,000 people last year, totaling over \$90 million in assistance to those whom Jesus Christ commands us to serve. While this makes an immeasurable impact on so many, within the 19 counties of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, our three major urban counties have poverty rates above 18 percent, some rural areas have rates above 22 percent, and unemployment still remains a distressing reality for too many households everywhere.³ All of our agencies together, even in conjunction with the many other secular and faith-based agencies in our communities, cannot meet the material needs of everyone. Responding to such challenges requires both unwavering personal and social responsibility. Thus, we conduct our ministries in partnership with essential government programs that provide a reasonable safety net to those in crisis while they work to get back on their feet. This is particularly important during our lingering economic downturn.

Ensuring the welfare of our most vulnerable residents is not just a humane gesture. It is also essential in order to build vibrant communities and a strong economy. Investing in programs that address basic needs and maximize the potential of vulnerable residents makes the most of our human resources, helping every resident to contribute to our educational, political and business communities. Supporting the programs in the “circle of protection” is sound fiscal policy. Often,

¹ Those agencies included in the *2012 Official Catholic Directory*, which provide human services, excluding health care systems and senior residences.

² Letter from Most Rev. Stephen E. Blaire and Most Rev. Richard E. Pates to U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate, November 13, 2012.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Estimates Branch, Release date: November 2011 (as reported by www.povertyusa.org)

a small investment in social service programs pays big dividends in the long run by reducing crime, increasing family stability, improving school performance, and lowering inappropriate emergency room visits, to cite just a few positive consequences.

For instance, a Dayton woman making the loving choice of adoption provides a stable home for her adopted children but needs support from the Women, Infants and Children program (WIC). In Cincinnati, a number of children who cannot be served in traditional classroom settings benefit from programs from St. Joseph Orphanage, made possible through Title I education funds. Many families in Springfield, finding their way to food pantries supported by our food bank there, also need the help provided by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to reduce hunger at home. And, in communities all throughout the Archdiocese, there are many people who would even be without a home if it were not for federal housing and emergency shelter programs. The resources of all our agencies would be immensely strained at this time should such federal safety nets be frayed by drastic cuts. Furthermore, the well-being of our communities would be even more greatly challenged if such poverty-related situations could not receive the attention they require.

These local realities underscore the traditional principles and values provided by our U.S. Catholic bishops to guide budgetary deliberations:

1. Every budget decision should be assessed by whether it protects or threatens human life and dignity.
2. A central moral measure of any budget proposal is how it affects “the least of these” (Matthew 25:31-46). The needs of those who are hungry and homeless, without work or in poverty should come first.
3. Government and other institutions have a shared responsibility to promote the common good of all, especially ordinary workers and families who struggle to live in a manner worthy of their dignity in difficult economic times.

We ask Congress to avoid sequestration and protect from disproportionate cuts the Women, Infants and Children program (WIC), affordable housing funds, agricultural surplus to food banks, emergency assistance, homelessness and shelter funds, and community health centers. In addition, we seek protection for educational services for at-risk students as Title I-A, Title II-A, and IDEA. Poverty-focused international assistance, which comprises less than 1 percent of the federal budget but makes significant impacts on the lives and dignity of countless people in developing countries, should also be shielded from major reductions. In addressing future budgets, we ask that Congress not seek disproportionate cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), support for food banks, the Earned Income Tax Credit, the Child Tax Credit, and Pell Grants.

We acknowledge that our political leaders have a very difficult task in the days ahead. Please join us in praying for Congress so that they may work together both to handle our nation’s deficits and to prioritize the poor and vulnerable in the federal budget. We ask that they keep in mind that it is through a partnership with an adequate federal safety net that the tireless work of our Catholic and all agencies, volunteers, and contributors can more effectively serve those in crisis. Ultimately, together, we can more confidently guide those who are struggling to become self-sufficient, so everyone may fully realize the human dignity that God has given us all.

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