

Hill Notes

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Protecting the Poor...

In the federal budget: A central moral test of society is how poor families and vulnerable people are treated. Poverty is growing. In 2008, 36 million people (12 percent of the population) were living in poverty in the United States. The Census Bureau reported that currently over 14 percent or 43 million people are currently living in poverty. This is the third consecutive increase in poverty and the largest number in the 51 years for which poverty estimates have been published. Priority for poor and vulnerable members of our society should be reflected in how the nation allocates scarce resources in the budget, in what laws are enacted and what policies and programs are funded or cut.

On February 14, 2011, President Obama will release his proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2012 and will recommend a five year freeze on programs serving poor and vulnerable people. Specifically, the Administration is calling for a freeze on non-security discretionary programs. Congress has already begun the process for considering proposals designed to balance the budget and reduce the federal deficit. Congress will be facing some difficult choices on how resources are allocated, which will have significant consequences for poor and vulnerable persons and the common good of the nation. The bishops will continue to raise the cry of the poor and vulnerable and work to ensure that everyone has a place at the table. The need to protect the poor during a time of austerity will be a central and consistent message of the Bishops' Conference.

Why are the bishops concerned about the budget of the federal government?

A budget is a moral document reflecting our priorities. The bishops' conference has taken the position that Congress should structure a budget that guarantees adequate funding to assist those trying to care for their children, gain access to health care or overcome hunger and homelessness. The bishops stated in *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* that "economic decisions and institutions should be assessed according to whether they protect or undermine the dignity of the human person." (#76)

Given the difficult fiscal situation and limited resources and the bishops oppose spending cuts to programs, do the bishops support growing the deficit or raising taxes?

One of the basic functions of government is to raise sufficient resources so that it can undertake efforts to "provide for the general welfare" and to promote the common good. When the basic requirements of human life and dignity for many go unmet, it is essential that adequate federal revenues be available to help meet these basic needs. Deficits, which result from inadequate revenues in relation to expenditures, can sometimes be justified as a necessary response to serious circumstances. However, if government continues to spend far more money than it takes in year after year, it could seriously limit its ability to meet our moral obligations to respond to basic human needs now and in the future.

Are there specific domestic programs to which the Catholic community opposes cuts?

Spending on Medicaid, Medicare and SCHIP is growing and cuts are likely. However, Congress should resist arbitrarily capping spending, cutting services to beneficiaries or reducing reimbursement to providers thereby driving them out of the program or limiting the number of patients they see. The driving force for the increase in Medicare, Medicaid, and SCHIP spending

is rising health care costs, which need to be addressed in the broader context of the continuing improvements to and implementation of health care reform.

The right to food is a basic economic right. Society should commit resources to assure that no one goes hungry. Therefore, nutrition programs such as the Supplemental Nutritional Assistant Program (formerly known as food stamps) should be adequately funded and cuts made to the program in 2010 should be restored.

On domestic discretionary programs, Congress should first allocate sufficient resources in the budget resolution to fund domestic discretionary spending at an appropriate and just level. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 14 percent of the federal budget in FY 2010, or \$482 billion, supported programs that provided significant assistance (other than health insurance or Social Security benefits) to individuals and families facing hardship. The Catholic community supports programs that strengthen the safety net and opposes efforts to weaken it. Programs that serve poor families, vulnerable people, the unemployed and low-wage workers, should be prioritized. Specifically, funding for programs such as child care assistance, the Community Services Block Grant, the Social Services Block Grant, the Community Development Block Grant, Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, nutrition programs including WIC, Section 8 housing vouchers, housing for the elderly and persons with disabilities, and programs serving families who are homeless are at particular risk in the proposed budget plans for Fiscal Year 2012.

For more information:

Contact Anthony Granado, Policy Advisor, USCCB Office of Domestic Social Development, 202-541-3189 or agranado@usccb.org

Tom Mulloy, Policy Advisor, USCCB Office of Domestic Social Development, 202-541-3445 or tmulloy@usccb.org