

LEGISLATIVE HOT LINE



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Sponsored by the Five Catholic Commissions and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development of the Secretariat for Catholic Charities Health and Human Services

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Poverty in the United States is a moral and social wound in the soul of our country. It is an ongoing disaster that threatens the health and well-being of our nation. We have the resources, experience, and knowledge to virtually eliminate poverty, especially long-term poverty, but we do not yet have the political will.

As members of Catholic Charities, on of the largest networks of social service providers in the nation, **we are deeply troubled by the fact that in recent years the federal government has substantially reduced the resources devoted to assisting those who are impoverished.**

There has been a conscious and deliberate retreat from our nation's commitment to economic justice for those who are poor. **We believe that poverty remains our nation's most serious political blind spot and one of our nation's most profound moral failings.**

Poverty in America, A Threat to the Common Good, Catholic Charities, USA, 2006.

The Scope and Nature of Poverty in the United States:

- ◇ 37 million people—about 12.6 percent of the population—live below the official federal poverty level, which in 2006 is \$20,000 for a family of four.
- ◇ Poverty rates are highest in central cities and in rural areas
- ◇ Between 2000 and 2004, the number of people living in poverty increased by 5.3 million.
- ◇ Poverty rates did not decline, even though the economy as a whole was in a long recovery.
- ◇ Most of the poor are workers. Nearly two out of three families with incomes below the poverty line include one or more workers.
- ◇ Poverty affects many Americans. Almost half of all Americans will have experienced poverty for a year or more at some point in their lives by the time they reach age 60.

Successful Policies: We should not overlook the fact that the United States has an important set of basic public structures that work effectively to ameliorate poverty and provide opportunity. The poverty rate for individuals in 2004 would be nearly double if it weren't for these and other successful policies that are in place:

- ◇ Social Security, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Medicaid, Medicare and housing assistance.
- ◇ Minimum wage, civil rights laws, and labor laws.

Specific Policy Proposals Supported by Catholic Charities USA:

To combat poverty systematically and effectively, the federal government must implement policy changes to address the current weaknesses in our economic and social policies. These policy changes include steps to:

- ◇ Create more livable wage jobs and raise wages, including the minimum wage.
- ◇ Invest in social policies that support low-income families and individuals.
 1. Strengthen and protect our nation's nutrition safety net

2. Improve the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program to benefit more families
3. Ensure universal health insurance coverage
4. Improve access to safe and stable child care
5. Support policies that strengthen families
6. Create more affordable housing
7. Improve the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to be more inclusive
8. Improve access to education and training
9. Address the growing wealth disparity

All of the above is in the report, Poverty in America, A Threat to the Common Good, Catholic Charities, USA, 2006.

Call to Action: In 2007 Congress must reauthorize a sweeping piece of legislation known as the Farm Bill. This legislation sets U.S. policy in major areas that affect domestic farmers and food producers, domestic food consumers, and farmers in developing countries. Reauthorization of the Farm Bill presents an opportunity to reshape our broken agricultural policies to build a more just framework that better serves rural communities and small and moderate-size family farms in the U.S., promotes good stewardship of the land, overcomes hunger here and abroad, and helps vulnerable farmers and their families in developing countries.

Call to Action: Working with our partners in the Catholic community, the Catholic community's policy priorities for the 2007 Farm Bill include:

- increasing investments that combat rural poverty and strengthen rural communities;
- strengthening and expanding programs that reduce hunger and improve nutrition in the United States;
- strengthening and increasing investment in policies that promote conservation and good stewardship of the land;
- providing transitions for farmers to alternative forms of support that are more equitable and do not distort trade in ways that fuel hunger and poverty;
- protecting the health and safety of farm workers;
- expanding research related to alternative and renewable forms of energy; and
- providing direct food aid efficiently and effectively to hungry people in other nations

Support Funding for Improvements to the Food Stamp Program

In *For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food*, the bishops reiterated that a primary goal of food and agricultural policy should be providing basic food and nutrition for all. In *Food Policy in a Hungry World*, the bishops called for strengthening the domestic food assistance programs to ensure that no one in America goes hungry or suffers malnutrition. "When the economy fails to provide the jobs and income necessary to prevent hunger and malnutrition, the various local, state, and national food assistance programs must be funded and expanded to provide food to all in need."

Call to Action: Congress must reauthorize the Food Stamps Program as part of the 2007 Farm Bill reauthorization. *Contact your Senators and Representatives on the Agriculture Committees and urge them to support the strongest possible Nutrition Title in the 2007 Farm Bill – including adjusting the benefit level to reflect increasing food costs and ending the five-year waiting period for adult legal immigrants' eligibility for food stamps.*

Support Full Funding for WIC

Each year, Congress determines in the Agriculture Appropriations bill how much to spend on the WIC program the following year. Work on appropriations bills usually begins early in the year. *Make*

*sure your Senators and Representatives know that you want adequate money set aside in the **2008 Agriculture Appropriations bill** so that all the women and children who will be eligible for **WIC** next year will be able to get assistance.*

Make Sure Low-Income Families Have Access to Food Stamps

Approximately 40 percent of those eligible to receive food stamps are not getting them. Many families leaving welfare do not realize they can get transitional food stamps for five months, and may still be eligible for food stamps after that. Other families are unable to meet the program's administrative requirements. It is important that agencies serving low-income people instruct them that regardless of the states' TANF rules, they may still be entitled to food stamps. And it is important to make sure that legal immigrants know that all children, as well as adults who have been here for five years, are now able to receive food stamps under new eligibility rules.

Call to Action: Work with your local agencies that serve low-income families to be sure that they inform these families of their potential eligibility for food stamps even if they have exhausted their TANF benefits. Continue to call for program simplification and outreach efforts to ensure that eligible families receive food stamps.

The State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)

The State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) plays an important role in ensuring that low-income children have access to health care coverage. This important program **must be reauthorized in 2007.**

SCHIP was created in 1997 to give states the option to extend health care coverage to low-income children who do not qualify for Medicaid because their family income is too high. Approximately 4 million children are now enrolled in SCHIP. Since SCHIP was enacted, the number of uninsured children has fallen by 2.7 million, despite a growth in child poverty and the decline in the number of children whose families get health care through employment.

SCHIP builds on Medicaid but differs from that program in significant ways. In most states, children in families with incomes up to twice the federal poverty level can qualify for SCHIP (though a few states have somewhat higher or lower eligibility levels). States have more flexibility in SCHIP benefits packages. Like Medicaid, it is a joint federal-state program, administered by the states within broad federal guidelines and funded by state dollars matched by federal dollars. SCHIP however is a capped grant program.

The federal government sets aside a fixed amount of funding available each year. The federal funding portion is more generous than under Medicaid, but once the federal limit is reached enrollment of eligible children stops.

The 1997 SCHIP law provided for a total of \$40 billion in federal funding over the first 10 years of the program. Because the cost of health care continues to rise, funding levels will have to be higher just to make sure that states can continue to cover the children currently enrolled in SCHIP. Funding will be needed so states can do outreach and enroll children who are not in the program.

Over 8 million children were uninsured in 2005. Almost 75% of those children were eligible for Medicaid or SCHIP but were not enrolled. We know that lack of health insurance has a negative impact on kids' health. Data from the 2005 National Health Interview Survey shows that children without insurance are far more likely to go without the health care they need, from well-child visits to prescriptions to dental and vision services. The SCHIP program is of vital importance to filling the gap in health care among needy children.

Call to Action: Contact your Senators and Representatives to express support for:

Working towards health care coverage for all children.

Adequate SCHIP funding so that (1) states can continue to cover the children currently enrolled in the program and (2) all eligible low income children not currently covered can participate in the SCHIP program.

Making it easier to enroll children in SCHIP and Medicaid.

Providing states with resources for outreach and education to bring eligible children into the program. .

Contact your legislator: CALL THE CAPITAL SWITCHBOARD AT 202-224-3121 or write them at Representative_____ U.S. House, Washington, D.C. 20515 or Senator_____ U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C. 20510.

For more information please call the Diocesan Social Action Office at 216-939-3851 or 888-620-5280. You can also visit our web page at www.catholic-action.org for more information. Thank you.