

# MASSACHUSETTS CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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## INFORMATION AND NEWS RELEASE

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### Massachusetts Catholic Bishops' Statement on Welfare Reform

#### WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ONE ANOTHER

##### Executive Summary

"We Are Responsible for One Another" reflects on the Bishops' previous statement, "Family: The Key to a Healthy Society," especially the several points having to do with public assistance (pp. 1-3).

The current statement outlines the Church's role as caregiver to poor children and their families (p. 3), discusses Catholic social teaching and welfare (p. 4), and current trends in welfare reform (p. 4).

The Bishops' central point is that the overarching goal of any welfare reform program should be to lessen the poverty of those dependent on welfare, particularly women and children. While we cannot be indifferent to the increasing costs of welfare assistance to the taxpayer, as taxpayers we remind ourselves of our responsibilities one to another. The disease is child poverty, not welfare. To us as a people and a Church that puts children and families first, true welfare reform in Massachusetts must address the shame of the hundreds of thousands of children who endure poverty in one of the wealthiest states of this nation (p. 4).

There are a number of recommendations made for changes at the Federal level, including a national minimum AFDC benefit, financial supports, and community services that help families get off welfare (pp. 4-5).

At the State level the Bishops want to be supportive of those proposals that have the following components (pp. 5-6):

- adequate subsistence income through cash payments or subsidized employment;
- health care for all members of the family;
- child care, as needed;
- and training for real-life jobs at real-world wages.

Further, the Bishops react to recent proposals to reform AFDC, and take the following positions:

- workfare (p.6): not opposed to work provisions if not unjust or coercive and do not deter from rehabilitation;
- job creation (p.6): in strong support, providing that total resources available is not reduced;

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- time caps (p.6): opposed, each family needs individual assessment of readiness for self-sufficiency;
- family caps (p.6): strongly opposed to any attempt to deny support to children born while family is on AFDC;
- establishment of paternity of illegitimate children (p.7): for, and enjoin all parents to support their children financially and emotionally;
- minor teenaged unwed mothers required to live with parents or in supportive housing (p.7): strongly support.

The function of public welfare is to provide care for those who are unable to do so for themselves. We are responsible for one another. That responsibility goes beyond providing subsistence sufficient to keep those dependent on us alive to return again tomorrow. Our responsibility to the families and children of today and the society of tomorrow is to free the very poor from the soul-stifling servitude of long-term welfare dependency. The dignity of human persons is fulfilled in the act of providing for their own and the support of their family, and in contributing to the greater society (p. 7).

The Bishops are not, at this time, supporting any specific program or plan for Welfare Reform at the national or local level. We realize the complexities of the issues involved, including the investment costs of real welfare reform. We are also aware on a day-to-day basis of the human costs. We are calling on public policymakers to approach this matter in a responsible, concerned manner, in a way in which all citizens are able to demonstrate their love and responsibility for those in need, to demonstrate our responsibility one for another.

As public policy proposals on Welfare Reform begin to take more definitive shape, we will be considering them not only through the prism of our 1991 Statement on the Family, but more specifically, we will measure them against the recommendations that we have made through the current statement, recommendations that we consider to be components of a just approach to Welfare Reform.

Especially at the local level, as our Commonwealth develops its approach to the issue, we urge legislators, policymakers, and all citizens to heed our call for social justice, mutual responsibility, and compassion toward the poor, a call that we outlined in specific terms in this statement.

Because we believe that child poverty is the root problem, more than assistance to their needy families, we also call on all persons of good will to work toward that day on which the need for that assistance is greatly diminished.

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May 11, 1994

## Massachusetts Catholic Bishops' Statement on Welfare Reform

### WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ONE ANOTHER

#### Purpose of this Statement:

Three years ago, we, the Diocesan Bishops of Massachusetts, issued our statement on the family entitled, "Family: The Key to A Healthy Society." Recognizing the intimate connection between family and society, we developed the concept of family as a unifying principle. Our desire was "to assess proposed legislation and governmental policies and programs in the light of their impact on family life in the Commonwealth."

The intent of this statement, therefore, is to offer such an assessment of the current debate on the important issue of welfare reform.

#### "Family: The Key to a Healthy Society"

The concluding paragraph of the 1991 statement on the family said in part:

"Our society must be responsive to the just needs and demands of families because families are the way to a sound, peaceful, just society. Without the family there is social dissolution and eventual chaos. Our society must be responsible because we recognize that persons and families have rights; rights that must be protected and fostered for the good of the person, of the family, and of the community. We are responsible for one another. In no place is that mutual responsibility felt more keenly or lived more truly than in the family. The more we as a society acknowledge this truth and live according to it, the healthier and sounder will be our social and civic life."

At that time we cited six areas that would frame our examination of issues affecting the family: The Family Itself, Housing, Health Care, Food, Education, and Environment.

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It is the first area, The Family Itself, in which we focused on family allowances to poor nuclear and single-parent families, that is most relevant to the issue of welfare reform.

What we said then is most pertinent to the current colloquy between those in public responsibility and all those standing with the poor:

"We need a legislative creativity which will ensure that poor families receive the monetary assistance necessary, but also that what they receive encourages and enables them to live their lives as a family unit and not as individual recipients of state largesse."

In order for this to occur we called for

- a.) Legislation and state programs that would openly acknowledge a bias in support of the family:
  - that would encourage families to stay together;
  - that would provide help to the family as a unit;
  - that would grant families the financial means to make choices in regard to the care and education of their children;
  - that would not unduly penalize a mother who needs or chooses to be at home with her children.
- b.) Special support for single-parent families to respond to the fact that one adult -- usually the mother -- is being asked to provide the home and the support that it normally takes two adults to provide. That is the standard by which day care, AFDC, health care, and education should be measured. One example of this is child support. The law should see to it that those who owe child support in fact fulfill their obligations.
  - Day care must be expanded, but in ways that would allow parental, extended family and neighborhood collaboration to shape the programs and thus guarantee the cultural, religious, and moral values of the families be included in the activities of the center;
- c.) Programs to be reviewed and, where necessary, changed in order to respond more quickly and effectively to domestic violence, to sexual abuse, especially of children, and to the various ways that exploitation goes on within a family;

- d.) Programs to be provided that will help young families, especially teenaged parents, or teenage mothers alone with their children, to learn to cope with life and to develop the domestic skills that are needed in terms of providing food, clothing, shelter and education for their children.
- e.) Legislation to provide pregnancy leave, parental leave, and other benefits that would favor the domestic harmony and potential of the family.

In support of the family we also urged that no legislation be passed and no program approved that compromises the family or takes from the family the roles and initiatives that are proper to it. The extension of the title "family" to gay and lesbian couples and the granting of economic privileges to "domestic" partners on an equal plane with true families must be opposed and rejected as undermining the family in our society today.

The conclusion of the section on the Family Itself reiterated our commitment to bring an end to the scourge of abortion as the primordial act of family violence and to provide women with alternatives to protect life from the moment of conception. Pro-life means care for woman and child with respect for the true dignity of everyone: children, the aged, women, men and the society as a whole.

#### **The Church as Caregiver to Poor Children and Their Families**

There has been a heightening in the public debate on welfare reform since our 1991 statement on the family. It cannot be denied that the public welfare system needs reform, as we observed then.

As Catholics and as taxpaying citizens, we are called to protect the poor, the vulnerable, and the oppressed. We are particularly concerned that children are afforded a fair chance at life. In Massachusetts, one of every four children under five is a beneficiary of AFDC.

Our community of faith has a long and continuing involvement with children and families, clearly seen in the experience of Catholic Charities and other Catholic social services, as well as the Christian service work of our parishes. For generations these instrumentalities, along with Catholic schools, have been catalysts in assisting the poor to move into working- and middle-class status.

A recent analysis of recipients of emergency services in the Boston Archdiocese has shown that the overwhelming majority of those who come to us as Church for assistance with the basic subsistence needs of food and clothing are AFDC recipients:

largely single-parent families having difficulty surviving on public cash assistance that provides an income which is 42% below the poverty level.

Church-sponsored food distribution programs in Massachusetts have also seen the influx of the thousands of persons who were formerly recipients of the State's General Relief welfare program, further stressing resources in the voluntary sector.

It is not only our values that we bring proudly to this concern, therefore, but also our broad experience and expertise in caring for poor children and their families.

No institution in American society is more deeply involved in serving the needs of children than is the Catholic Church.

### **Catholic Social Teaching and Welfare**

Certainly, therefore, we want to see the good preserved that now exists in the current AFDC welfare program. AFDC provides financial assistance, health care, and access to child care to approximately 112,000 Massachusetts families - - largely children and single parents. Are these not today's anawin, the "widows and orphans" of scripture?

In its Labor Day 1992 Statement, the United States Catholic Conference summed up the Catholic position on work and welfare:

"Catholic social teaching is pro-work, pro-family, and pro-child. Our bishops' conference strongly advocates changes in the welfare system that 'assist recipients, wherever possible, to become self-sufficient through gainful employment.' We believe that everyone who can, should work. What we need are new approaches to welfare -- not 'workfare' but 'family-fair' -- policies that offer poor families real opportunities to leave poverty and dependency behind, policies that do not discourage marriage and earnings, that do not simply cut off health care, housing, child care and other essential help as families leave welfare for work and education. Our number one priority should be to create real opportunities for meaningful work so that families can live in dignity, contribute to our national economy and build our local communities."

### **Current Trends in Welfare Reform**

In addition to codifying recent positions on welfare reform, we seek through this statement to offer also our guidance on some of the trends in current thinking on welfare reform.

The overarching goal of any welfare reform program should be to lessen the poverty of those dependent upon it for subsistence, particularly women and children. While we cannot be indifferent to the increasing costs of welfare assistance to the taxpayer, as

taxpayers we must remind ourselves of our responsibilities one to another. The disease here is child poverty, not welfare. To us as a people and a Church that puts children and families first, true welfare reform in Massachusetts must address the shame of the hundreds of thousands of children who endure poverty in one of the wealthiest states of this nation.

### **Federal Level**

At the federal level, we call for

a national minimum AFDC benefit that provides an adequate level of support to families from which they can begin the road to self-sufficiency;

financial supports that help families work their way off welfare and into jobs that lift them over the poverty line;

expansion and coordination of community support services needed to effectively help people make the transition from welfare to work, and to prevent working poor families from falling back onto welfare;

an overhaul of the present AFDC program, which is not designed for certain groups. We suggest alternatives be created for the following:

**Children of Children.** We support a minimum age for AFDC eligibility and suggest 18 years of age. While continuing AFDC support, teenage mothers younger than 18 who choose to parent their children by themselves, need a host of additional supports that could be much better addressed in a program designed especially for them.

**Refugees.** An alternative, job-oriented assistance program for refugees should replace AFDC, which is neither truly transitional nor responsive to the special cultural and economic needs of refugees.

**Adults with learning disabilities and/or serious health problems.** An alternative program is needed for parents who are not able to work because of severe learning disabilities and/or health problems.

**People who fail or refuse to work toward self-sufficiency.** A fall-back program should be set up for people who fail to make progress or refuse to participate in the development of their own capacities for self-sufficiency.

## State Level

At the State level, we are concerned with the increasing evidence of longer stays on welfare dependency than had previously been thought, and the effects that this has on family life, the spirit of the individual, and the formation and development of children.

We are therefore supportive of welfare reform that is pro-active in breaking the cycle of poverty without penalizing the poor children and families dependent upon it for subsistence. Any welfare proposal should provide

adequate subsistence income through cash payments or subsidized employment;

health care for all members of the family;

out-of-home child care as needed, especially when the child's welfare is at stake;

training for real-life jobs at real-world wages.

We do not oppose work provisions providing that they are not unjust or coercive, and that they do not take the family member away from family duties, away from needed counselling and/or alcohol and substance abuse treatment, or education and training for employment.

We have reservations about proposals which would terminate welfare benefits after specific time periods, and ask for a more individualized assessment of the families' needs, time on the welfare rolls being only one of the criteria examined.

We are in strong support of job creation proposals, providing that the sum total of resources available to the AFDC family is not diminished as work is substituted for welfare dependency.

We are in support of those provisions that would decrease the small amount of existing welfare fraud, preserving the dignity of the recipient.

We are in strong opposition to those "family cap" proposals that would reduce support to those children who are born to women on welfare. This would lead to exacerbated levels of child poverty, family homelessness, and increased destabilization of family life among the poor.

We have special concern about the status of unwed teenaged mothers, and share our fellow citizen's shame in Massachusetts' record as the state with the largest percentage of illegitimate births to teenagers in the country. In addition to the many deleterious effects that illegitimacy triggers in families, society, and within children, we are also aware that three out of

four unmarried teenaged mothers go on welfare within four years of giving birth. Clearly, this is a time and a place in which the values of abstinence from sexual activity before marriage cannot be stressed too highly.

We are heartened with the resurgence of interest and support for abstinence-based sex-education programs in other parts of the country, and urge consideration here in Massachusetts. Sex education programs in the schools must be unequivocal in stating that sexual activity belongs within the framework of marriage, and that young people should abstain from sexual activity until they are married. Further, marriage should be seen and taught as properly exercised only within the commitment of a man and a woman to a responsible life-long partnership. Responsible welfare reform finds itself re-instilling what has been termed traditional family values: restraint, responsibility, and self-reliance.

We are, therefore, supportive of those efforts to establish paternity of children born of illegitimate unions; and we enjoin all parents -- but especially fathers -- to assume the responsibilities that they have as parents to their children. Parental responsibilities certainly include but are not limited to financial support of children, but also includes as a central core the loving and ongoing interest and contact that is the byproduct of a continuing relationship between parent and child.

We are also particularly supportive of those proposals that would require teenaged unwed mothers to live with their parents or in appropriate group settings rather than to establish their own independent households. Their lives are very difficult and they and their children desperately need the structure and support that extended family and the larger society can provide.

All teen parents' homes should be carefully evaluated by experienced professionals.

We call for an expansion of supportive residential programs for teens who cannot live with parents or other relatives. Currently there are in Massachusetts fewer than 100 slots in specialized teen parent housing programs and over 2500 homeless teen parents.

We call for investment in supportive services for teen parents such as parent education and support groups, including a focus on encouraging abstinence from further premarital sexual activity.

## **Conclusion**

As reflected in this statement, the issue of welfare reform is highly complex and subject to frequent changes triggered by environmental and systemic causes. We must keep in mind that the function of public welfare is to provide care for those who are unable to do so for themselves. While we are not unmindful of the

economic aspects of public welfare, our central concern in this regard is the furtherance of positive family life as the key to a healthy society.

We therefore remind all those in positions of power to frame new approaches to public welfare, that the teachings of scripture is that we are, in fact, our sister's and our brother's keeper: We are responsible for one another. That responsibility goes beyond providing mere subsistence sufficient to keep those dependent on us alive to return again tomorrow. Our responsibility to the families and children of today and the society of tomorrow is to free the very poor from the soul-stifling servitude of long-term welfare dependency. The dignity of human persons is fulfilled in the act of providing for their own and the support of their family, and in contributing to the greater society.

We are confident that if welfare reform were to be addressed in this responsible, concerned, and loving manner, it would be possible for liberating and just solutions to be struck.

We congratulate all those of good will who have worked on this vital issue. We ask that they and all will join with us in prayer for a compassionate and just solution, one resulting in freeing the families and children of today and of tomorrow from the bondage of poverty and its attendant social ills.

+ His Eminence, Bernard Cardinal Law  
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