

The 2004 State Budget: A Moral Statement

“Poor children, workers and families may not have the most powerful lobbies, but they have the greatest needs. We welcome a broad debate on economic life, but we cannot support a retreat in the fight against poverty and economic injustice. Let us ask those who seek to lead and represent us how they will govern and vote on key issues of human life, human dignity and economic justice. And let us as citizens and believers continue to advocate for people who are poor and vulnerable in our communities, nation and world.”

— A Decade After Economic Justice for All
Continuing Principles, Changing Context, New Challenges
National Conference of Catholic Bishops

OVERVIEW

A clear indicator of the moral strength of a society is the assistance it provides its citizens who are most needy. Michigan’s elected officials currently face the substantial responsibility of balancing a state budget that is deep in red ink. Many thoughtful ideas have come forth on how to handle this dilemma, with input coming from all over the state. At this moment it is incumbent upon our policymakers to understand there are considerable moral obligations that come with balancing our state budget. Certainly there is a direct correlation between moral government and the moral behavior and attitude of its citizens; therefore, a moral budget created by the state should foster broad implications upon the civility of its citizens.

Matters of importance such as economic justice, social responsibility, human dignity and concern for the common good all must be considered when sitting together at the table. The FY 2004 state budget revenue deficit presents state policymakers the opportunity to look past party lines and implement policies that are beneficial to all of society, especially the poor, the sick and the elderly.

Currently the Michigan Legislature and the executive office are exploring solutions to alleviate the over \$920 million revenue shortfall. What better time to come together as Republicans and Democrats, men and women, to present our state's citizens with a solution that will elevate the moral fiber of Michigan into the future.

Two departments within state government, the Department of Community Health and the Family Independence Agency, are most responsible for supporting those who are in need of state assistance. The departments are also responsible for ensuring the health and safety of our most vulnerable citizens. Most critical in these difficult times is the Medicaid program, which has been cut by more than one-half billion dollars since 1998. Additionally, as lawmakers consider funding options and/or budget cuts for various state departments, Michigan’s tax structure must continue to be implemented in a fair and objective fashion.

The purpose of this FOCUS is to explore our state budget as a moral statement as it is being developed and revised for the current and coming fiscal years.

THE DEPARTMENTS AND THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES

Michigan Department of Community Health

The Department of Community Health has several responsibilities that are associated with caring for the less fortunate, especially the poor and sick children, as well as providing our senior citizens with sufficient medical coverage that will assist them through their golden years. The department also overlooks and provides mental health and substance abuse services, physical health and protection services and issues that deal with pregnant women, children and families.

Among the programs that are supported by the Department of Community Health are:

MEDICAID:

This program provides health care coverage for low-income families and individuals – including families with children, pregnant women and persons under the age of 21. It also offers help to persons who have a disability, and people age 65 and over. Medicaid is critical to the health and well being of Michigan's citizens who are not offered health care through their employer or cannot afford care due to its high cost. Increasing numbers of Michigan citizens are enrolling in Medicaid, making it more imperative for the state to recognize the program's need and to properly fund it at accommodating levels.

MICHILD:

A health insurance program for uninsured children of Michigan's working families. MICHILD services are provided by many HMO's and other health care plans throughout Michigan. The program covers such areas as regular checkups, shots, emergency care, prenatal care and delivery and hospital care.

INFANT MENTAL HEALTH:

Infant mental health services provide home-based

parent-infant support and intervention services to families where the parent's condition and life circumstances or the characteristics of the infant threaten the parent-infant attachment and the consequent social, emotional, behavioral and cognitive development of the infant. Services reduce the incidence and prevalence of abuse, neglect, developmental delay, behavioral and emotional disorders.

Of critical importance to our society are the children for whom we are morally responsible. Children are the most vulnerable members of the human family. As policies are advanced to help children they must support families, since children's lives are nurtured or protected, enhanced or diminished by the quality of family life. Of key concern is ensuring the advancement of economic policies that shape moral principles. Economic choices must be

judged by how they protect or undermine the life and dignity of the human person, support the family and serve the common good.

It is critical that the state does not balance the budget on the backs of poor families and children who depend on services such as Medicaid for health care. Because of the state's slumping economy, a record number of Michigan citizens, families and children, are seeking health care through Medicaid. Over the past 18 months nearly 400,000 residents of Michigan were enrolled in Medicaid, bringing the total number of patients in

the state to over 1.3 million.

Unfortunately, Michigan doctors and hospitals are now treating a record number of Medicaid patients while receiving significantly less funding from the state government. Due to the fact that funding for health care providers has been cut by more than \$500 million over the past five years, care is already being denied to thousands of poor families, the disabled and children across the state. Because of this disproportionate equation, it is impossible for hospitals, physicians, mental health care providers, nursing homes and others to care for the skyrocketing number of Medicaid patients while Medicaid funding is evaporating. Lawmakers and the administration must pay specific attention to the record rate at which

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funding is decreasing and subscribers are increasing. Proper health care is vital to the strength of our communities, and it is vital for those families and individuals who depend on Medicaid to keep themselves and their children healthy.

Michigan Family Independence Agency

The Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA) plays an integral role in state government regarding the protection of children. Numerous services provided by FIA are designed to help foster the positive advancement of underprivileged and abused children across the state.

Protective services, youth programs, foster care, day care and adoption are a few programs funded by the FIA to ensure that our most vulnerable citizens are afforded the protection they deserve.

Among the programs that are supported by the Family Independence Agency are:

FINANCIAL

ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS:

The state, in cooperation with the federal government, provides Michigan citizens in dire need of temporary relief with assistance programs. Those programs include: TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), which provides cash assistance to families who meet the income and eligibility work requirements; State Emergency Relief, which provides temporary financial help to needy persons faced with an emergency health or safety situation; State Disability Assistance, which provides financial assistance to disabled persons who are not eligible for the TANF program; Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, which provides assistance to disadvantaged households in meeting the costs of energy; and Child Development Day Care, where the parent or legal guardian is unavailable to provide for the child – all receive state assistance, with



THOMAS MORE
*Patron Saint of
Statesmen and
Politicians*

federal aid in most programs. To support these individuals who need the service most, state as well as federal funding must continue to ensure the health and safety of our citizens.

CHILDREN'S

PROTECTIVE SERVICES:

FIA is responsible for investigating reports of suspected child abuse and neglect. Michigan's Child Protection Law defines child abuse and neglect as harm or threatened harm to a child's health or welfare by a parent, legal guardian or any other person responsible for the child's health or welfare. In 88 county and district offices, children's protective services workers investigate reports of suspected child abuse and neglect.

FOSTER CARE:

FIA's foster program solicits caring individuals who can provide a safe and nurturing home environment for children who have been placed out of their home due to abuse or neglect. The family foster care program is designed to provide a substitute family life experience for a child in a household that has been approved and licensed by the Michigan Family Independence Agency. It is of the essence for the state to re-evaluate the manner in which it funds faith-based programs that are dedicated to ensuring the proper care of foster children.

ADOPTION:

FIA is given the charge of finding permanent homes for children who have come into the state's care. Some of these children have been abused or neglected and all of them have been removed from their homes.

The Catholic Church believes that every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities – to one another, to our families, and to the larger society. We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. Learning to practice the virtue of solidarity means learning

that “loving our neighbor” has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

ACHIEVING THE COMMON GOOD

In achieving the common good, Catholic social teaching recognizes that excessive intervention by the state can threaten personal freedom and initiative and interfere with work best completed by smaller bodies, such as local communities, churches and families (par. 1883, Catechism of the Catholic Church). Additionally, all individuals have the responsibility to try to care for themselves and their family (pars. 1914, 2427 Catechism).

This teaching, however, also calls on government to assist individuals and communities when they cannot help themselves. In performing this role the state is fulfilling its moral responsibility to promote the common good (pars. 1902-1903; 1905-1912, Catechism).

A Moral Imperative

The State of Michigan must face its responsibility in assisting those in need. Serious budget reform is necessary, especially in the area of Medicaid. We

must spend less time devising political strategies and more time developing sound public policies. We must make every effort to ensure the human dignity of every individual. The question then is, what values will guide the discussion and the decisions in the effort to formulate solutions that will enhance the dignity of those individuals who are in need? Failure to take this seriously will undermine human dignity and society as a whole. Impelled by this moral responsibility, funding priorities, not simply budget cuts, must direct the budget process.

As legislators and the executive office consider what role revenue should play in the budget process, we remind them that the burden of taxes should be in proportion to the citizen’s ability to pay. Government has the duty to collect sufficient revenue to protect the common good and to deliver the services that are best supported through government. Those revenues must fund departments and programs fairly and proportionately so that one department does not receive an excessive, unnecessary amount in lieu of other deserving programs or departments. By adhering to the above mentioned principles we can produce a budget statement that elevates our moral fiber and promotes the common good for the State of Michigan.

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