

HEALTH and HUNGER

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As people of faith we believe that the most important consideration in crafting a state budget must be meeting the needs of the most vulnerable – including children, immigrants, the disabled, and the elderly. Over the years, as a state and as a nation, we have developed several programs to embody our shared values of protecting and supporting “the least” among us: Medicaid, BadgerCare, FoodShare, and School Breakfast and School Lunch, among others. These programs serve the neighbors next to us in the pew, down the street and those we will never meet.

But these programs also support the common good – the well-being of our communities and everyone who lives in them. They protect us in times of personal crisis and help households weather tough economic times. They ensure that our children have the health care and nutrition that they need to become capable, productive, responsible adults. They help keep money flowing through local economies. They sustain the dignity and hopefulness that are essential to a community’s spirit.

Medicaid

Wisconsin’s Medicaid, or Medical Assistance (MA), program enables vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community to have access to health care. One MA subprogram serves the elderly, blind, and disabled individuals. A second, BadgerCare Plus, provides care for low-income families with children, and was recently expanded to include childless adults. The state and federal government share the responsibility for funding and administering the program.

During the last few years several factors – the expansion of the program, increased outreach efforts, rising health insurance costs, the economic recession and high unemployment – have dramatically increased the number of people supported by the program. Over 20% of the state’s population, or 1.16 million persons are now covered, including a third of our children. This has helped many people who could not afford health insurance due to unemployment or low income. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (“the stimulus”) provided funds for the expansion, but now that the money is gone, Wisconsin needs to figure out how to sustain the program: We face a \$1.8 billion MA funding deficit over the next two fiscal years (with more than two-thirds of that attributable to the end of the enhanced MA funding from the federal government).

The budget bill introduced by Governor Walker cuts \$500 million in state Medicaid funding over the next two years. However, it does not give any specifics for how this would affect coverage of children, parents, childless adults or pregnant women. Because of the budget repair bill that was passed last week, the Department of Health Services would be responsible for making those decisions, with only very limited oversight from the Legislature or input from the public.

We need to tell our elected leaders how important BadgerCare and other MA programs are for our families, our congregations and our communities. Wisconsin must not try to solve its budget problems by depriving our most vulnerable neighbors of access to the health care that they and their children need.

FoodShare

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP – which used to be called Food Stamps) is a federal program that is administered by Wisconsin under the name of FoodShare. It provides low-income households with a limited amount of money each month (in the form of an Electronic Benefits Transfer or EBT card) to help them purchase groceries.

The federal government will not pay for FoodShare benefits for documented immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for less than five years. States can choose to provide such benefits out of their own budget, and Wisconsin has done so for many years. Governor Doyle eliminated that funding from the 2009-10 biennial budget, but – thanks to advocacy by faith groups and others – it was restored by the Joint Finance Committee. Once again, these funds have been removed from the biennial budget.

Scripture calls us again and again to care for “the stranger” among us. Our legislators need to restore these benefits during the budget process so that recent immigrants can get the support they need as they establish themselves in their new homeland.

School Meals

More than 40 percent of students in Wisconsin qualify for free or reduced price meals during this school year, compared to less than 30 percent seven years ago. Free and reduced-priced school meals are a critical component in the fight to end hunger and address the root causes of poverty in our state. Students that experience hunger face staggering hurdles in the effort to learn and succeed. Providing two healthy meals to children helps to reduce stress for families struggling to put food on the table. For many children, the meal at school is not only a reliable source of nutrition; it may be their only meal of the day.

School Breakfast and School Lunch programs are supported by federal, state, and school district funding. Governor Walker’s proposed budget leaves the state’s contribution to these programs relatively intact. However, the proposed budget’s severe cuts to state aid for school funding in general would greatly limit the ability of school districts to provide these programs to their students without making further cuts in other areas.

The future of our state depends on having students whose readiness to learn is not impaired by hunger pangs or the lack of adequate nutrition. At a bare minimum, our elected representatives must maintain the Governor’s proposed levels of state funding for school meals.