

Statement On Welfare Reform

Michigan Catholic Conference Board of Directors

The Catholic community brings both convictions and experience to the welfare reform debate. Our convictions are based on the principle of human dignity. We hold that every person is created in the image and likeness of God and that each human life is sacred from the moment of conception. Our experience is that of the largest nonpublic provider of human services to poor families in the United States. We know well the failures of the current system, the possibilities and limitations of volunteer services, and the ways in which human dignity is undermined and denied by poverty in our nation.

It is fair to say that there is no institution in our country which is more committed to the values of family life, personal responsibility, sexual restraint, work and sacrifice than the Catholic Church. We are also committed to the values of justice and charity and to solidarity with God's poor. We have been working for years on genuine welfare reform which would strengthen family life, encourage and reward work, preserve a safety net for the weakest and most vulnerable members of our society, build public-private partnerships to overcome poverty, invest in human dignity, and promote the sanctity of life in all its stages. Our standard for any welfare reform proposal has always been: Will it enhance the lives and dignity of poor children and their families? Certain aspects of current reform proposals do not measure up to this standard.

We are specifically opposed to the following child exclusion provisions being proposed at the federal level:

- Denying benefits to children who are born to unmarried mothers under 18 years old, or 21 at state option.
- Denying benefits to children who are born to mothers who already are receiving AFDC.
- Denying benefits to children who do not have legal paternity established.
- Denying benefits to children whose mothers have received welfare in the past for a total of five years, or two years at state option.

These provisions reflect the trend toward unjustly punishing the poor, especially women and children, for their poverty. This trend has brought us to the place where decision makers across the political spectrum find it more expedient to punish, rather than to protect, the most vulnerable members of our society.

We will continue our two thousand year tradition of service to those in need. We help because of our deep religious conviction that it is our duty and privilege to serve the poor.

But nationally our social service agencies, already serving seven times more people today than in 1981, would find it impossible to serve even a small number of the new people whom the government proposes to turn away.

The target of welfare reform ought to be poverty, not poor people. We should pursue a system which promotes education and training, with a living wage, and a goal of full employment. Welfare reform will be a clear test of our nation's values and our commitment to seek the common good. We are ready to work with our state and federal government to shape genuine reform which protects the lives and enhances the dignity of "the least of these."

*Michigan Catholic Conference
Board of Directors
Cardinal Adam J. Maida, Chairman
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