

MORAL
PRINCIPLES
and POLICY
PRIORITIES FOR
WELFARE
REFORM

A CATHOLIC
CHILDREN
AND
FAMILIES
✠
first
CAMPAIGN

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A STATEMENT OF THE
ADMINISTRATIVE BOARD
OF THE UNITED STATES
CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

The statement *Moral Principles and Policy Priorities for Welfare Reform* was requested, revised, and adopted by the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Conference at its March 14-16, 1995, meeting. The statement is based on past policy of the bishops including *Economic Justice for All* and *Putting Children and Families First*. *Moral Principles and Policy Priorities for Welfare Reform* is authorized for publication as a statement of the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Conference by the undersigned.

Monsignor Dennis M. Schnurr
General Secretary
USCC/NCCB

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INTRODUCTION

At this moment in the life of our nation in which we Americans struggle to find a balance between the needs of our poor and the demands of fiscal accountability for our future economic health, we want to present once again the principles of Catholic social teaching in order to provide a context for national discussion. We focus on the question of welfare reform, although our concerns extend equally to critical issues of human life, budget priorities, housing, the rights of immigrants, and health care reform.

Our nation faces fundamental choices on welfare reform. This debate and these decisions will be a test of our nation's values and our commitment to the "least among us." Our people and leaders share many similar goals, including reducing illegitimacy and dependency, promoting work, and empowering families. Congress must sort through fiscal, political, and ideological pressures to fashion real reform which reflects our nation's best values and offers genuine help and opportunity to our poorest families. We pray this debate will advance the common good, not further divide our people along economic, racial, ethnic, and ideological lines.

As the Administrative Board of the United States Catholic Bishops' Conference, we offer these reflections as a contribution to this important debate. Our purpose is not to make any partisan point, but to share our principles and experience in the hope that they will help lift up the moral dimensions and human consequences of this debate. As religious teachers, we draw our directions from consistent Catholic moral principles, not ideological or political agendas. The values that guide our approach to welfare reform are not new:

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- Respect for human life and human dignity;
 - The importance of the family and the value of work;
 - An option for the poor and the call to participation;
 - The principles of subsidiarity and solidarity.

However, these principles take on special urgency when a fifth of our children are growing up poor in the richest nation on earth and 30 million Americans of all ages live in poverty. Lack of opportunity, poverty, and dependency are destroying millions of families, harming countless children.

As pastors, we also seek to share our community's experiences in serving those in need. Poor families are not an abstract issue for us; they are sisters and brothers. They have names and faces. They are in our shelters and soup kitchens, our parishes and Catholic Charities agencies. As the largest non-public provider of human services to poor families, the Catholic community knows all too well the failures and abuses of the current system, the potential and limitations of private and religious charity, and the ways in which lives are diminished and dignity denied by widespread dependency and poverty in our land.

No institution in American life is more committed to the basic moral values of marriage, family, responsibility, work, sexual restraint, and sacrifice for children than our Church. We preach, teach, and promote these values every day in our parishes, schools, and outreach efforts. We also are committed to the values of justice, charity, and solidarity with the poor and vulnerable. We believe our society needs both more personal responsibility *and* broader social responsibility, better values *and* better policies to reduce poverty and dependency in the United States.

THE URGENCY OF REFORM

We strongly support genuine welfare reform that strengthens families, encourages productive work, and protects vulnerable children. We are not defenders of the welfare status quo, which sometimes relies on bureaucratic approaches, discourages work, and breaks up families. However, we oppose abandonment of the federal government's necessary role in helping families overcome poverty and meet their children's basic needs.

It is worth recalling that many of us are or have been the beneficiaries of government assistance—direct and indirect—but many are rightly frustrated by the current welfare system:

- Recipients who find their dignity undermined and their needs poorly addressed;
- Taxpayers who fear their dollars encourage dependency rather than empowerment;
- Providers who spend more time checking for fraud than helping families;
- Public officials who have responsibility without adequate resources, accountability without sufficient authority.

The status quo is unacceptable. It is children who pay the greatest price for the failures of the current system. Genuine welfare reform is a moral imperative and urgent national priority.

AN AGENDA FOR REFORM

Welfare reform needs to be comprehensive in analysis but targeted and flexible in its implementation. We seek a new approach that promotes greater responsibility and offers more concrete help to families in leaving poverty behind through productive work and other assistance. Increased accountability and incentives should be tailored to a particular family's needs and circumstances, not "one-size-fits-all" requirements. Top-down reform with rigid national rules cannot meet the needs of a population as diverse as poor families. However, simply shifting responsibility without adequate resources, standards, and accountability could leave America's poor children worse off. Genuine welfare reform should rely on incentives more than harsh penalties; for example, denying needed benefits for children born to mothers on welfare can hurt the children and pressure their mothers toward abortion and sterilization.

More specifically, we will advocate for welfare reform which:

A. PROTECTS HUMAN LIFE AND HUMAN DIGNITY.

We believe a fundamental criterion for all public policy, including welfare reform, is protection of human life and human dignity. In states across the country, our State Catholic Conferences have stood against proposals that deny benefits to children because of their mother's age or dependence on welfare. These provisions, whatever their intentions, are likely to encourage abortion, especially in those states that pay for abortions but not for assistance to these children. In seeking to change the behavior of parents, these provisions hurt children, and some unborn children will pay with their lives.

Our Church works every day against sexual irre-

sponsibility and the out-of-wedlock births which come with it. We do not believe teenagers should be encouraged to set up their own households. However, legislation offering increased flexibility to states should not restrict assistance in ways we, and most observers, believe will encourage abortions. We are working with Catholic Charities USA and other national pro-life groups in opposing these provisions and in proposing alternatives that provide assistance in ways that safeguard children but do not reinforce inappropriate or morally destructive behavior.

For us, this is a matter of moral consistency. Our faith requires us to protect the lives and dignity of the vulnerable children, whether they are born or unborn. We cannot support policies which are likely to lead to more abortions. Every child is precious to us. We recognize that human life is also threatened and diminished by the failures of the current welfare system and our broader culture. Children thrown from windows, found in dumpsters, and abused in their homes are tragic symptoms of culture in disarray and a welfare system in urgent need of real reform. It is worth noting that it is not just low-income families that sometimes engage in destructive behavior. Personal irresponsibility, family disintegration, and loss of moral values touch not just the "down and out," but also the "rich and famous" and the rest of us.

B. STRENGTHENS FAMILY LIFE.

Welfare reform should affirm the importance of marriage, strong intact families, personal responsibility, self-discipline, sacrifice, and basic morality. It should help mothers and fathers meet the social, economic, educational, and moral needs of their children. We support a children's tax credit (which includes poor families), a strengthened Earned Income Credit, and stronger child support enforcement to help meet the economic needs of

America's families. We also support policies to keep families together and fathers involved, including new efforts to discourage parenthood outside of marriage, an end to marriage penalties in our tax code, and a halt to welfare policies that discourage marriage and discriminate against two-parent families. Our society must discourage adolescent sexual activity and teen pregnancy with at least as much urgency and persistence as we bring to discouraging smoking and substance abuse among our young.

C. ENCOURAGES AND REWARDS WORK.

Those who can work ought to work. Employment is the expected means to support a family and make a contribution to the common good. Too often welfare discourages work by eliminating health and child care benefits for those who leave the welfare rolls for the labor market. Real reform will offer education, training, and transitional help to those who exchange a welfare check for a paycheck. The challenge is to ensure that reform leads to productive work with wages and benefits that permit a family to live in dignity. Rigid rules and arbitrary timelines are no substitute for real jobs at decent wages and the tax policies that can help keep families off welfare.

D. PRESERVES A SAFETY NET FOR THE VULNERABLE.

For those who cannot work, or whose "work" is raising our youngest children, the nation has built a system of income, nutrition, and other supports. Society has a responsibility to help meet the needs of those who cannot care for themselves, especially young children. AFDC, food stamps, and other entitlement programs provide essential support for poor children. We will support more effective and responsive federal-state-community partnerships, but we cannot support "reform" that will make it more difficult for poor children to grow into productive

individuals. We cannot support reform that destroys the structures, ends entitlements, and eliminates resources that have provided an essential safety net for vulnerable children or permits states to reduce their commitment in this area. Also, we cannot support punitive approaches that target immigrants, even legal residents, and take away the minimal benefits that they now receive.

E. BUILDS PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS TO OVERCOME POVERTY.

As advocates of both subsidiarity and solidarity, we believe a reformed welfare system should rely more fully on the skill and responsiveness of community institutions and increased involvement and creativity of states. However, private and religious efforts to serve those in need are being severely stretched. They cannot—and should not—be seen as a substitute for wise public policy that promotes effective public-private partnerships.

Overcoming poverty and dependency will require more creative, responsive, and effective action in both the public and private sectors. Overly bureaucratic programs must give way to more community, local, and family initiatives more responsive to individual needs, potential, and problems. Mediating institutions can serve people with greater effectiveness, efficiency, and dignity. We are not opposed to carefully designed block grant initiatives in some areas if they come with adequate resources, accountability, and safeguards for poor families. States can shape programs to meet their local realities, but poverty has national dimensions and consequences that require federal commitment and national standards, safeguards, and protections. The nation needs to reform its welfare system, not abandon the federal government's role and responsibilities in fighting poverty. At the same time, private service providers should not be burdened with the enforcement of immigration laws.

F. INVESTS IN HUMAN DIGNITY.

In the long run, real welfare reform will save money, but in the short run it will require new investments in a family tax credit, education, training, WIC, work, and child support. Recent state experiences support the reality that moving people off welfare will be neither easy nor inexpensive. Our everyday experience in helping families leave welfare suggests that hope, opportunity, and investment are essential to this transition. The social contract we seek will offer training, education, jobs, and other concrete assistance in exchange for the persistent commitment and effort of persons trying to leave poverty. Simply cutting resources and transferring responsibility is not genuine reform. We must resist the temptation to see poor women, minority families, or immigrants as either passive victims or easy scapegoats for our society's social and economic difficulties.

CONCLUSION

For the Catholic community, the measure of welfare reform is whether it will enhance the lives and dignity of poor children and their families. The goal of reform ought to be to promote decent work and reduce dependency, not simply cut budgets and programs. The target of reform ought to be poverty, not poor families. We believe our society will be measured by how “the least of these” are faring. Welfare reform will be a clear test of our nation’s moral priorities and our commitment to seek the common good. We hope the welfare reform debate will be a time for civil and sustained dialogue, more focused on the needs and potential of poor families than on the search for partisan advantage. This debate could set an important framework for how our nation addresses not only welfare, but also other human needs. We hope these reflections will contribute to this kind of debate and will encourage Catholics to bring their voices and values to this important national dialogue, which will say so much about what kind of society we are and will become.

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