



TALKING POINTS - February 2013

A “CIRCLE OF PROTECTION” AROUND DOMESTIC ANTIPOVERTY PROGRAMS



Why are the bishops concerned about the federal budget?

The federal budget is a moral document that reflects our priorities as a society. Federal spending priorities are one way the government satisfies its obligation, in the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, to “make accessible to each what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on” (No. 1908).

The bishops have been consistent in their advocacy that the federal budget should meet certain moral criteria:

1. Every budget decision should be assessed by whether it protects or threatens human life and dignity.
2. A central moral measure of any budget proposal is how it affects the lives and dignity of “the least of these” (Matthew 25). The needs of those who are hungry and homeless, without work or in poverty should come first.
3. Government and other institutions have a shared responsibility to promote the common good of all, especially ordinary workers and families who struggle to live in dignity in difficult economic times.

What is the Circle of Protection? Has the Circle been successful?

The Circle of Protection is an unprecedented ecumenical Christian organization of more than 65 heads of denominations, relief and development agencies, and other Christian organizations, including the bishop chairmen of key USCCB policy committees.

In addition to the Catholic bishops, it includes the Salvation Army, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Council of Churches, and many more.

The Circle of Protection advocates on behalf of poor and vulnerable people because “they do not have powerful lobbies, but they have the most compelling claim on our consciences and common resources.”

The Circle’s advocacy has been instrumental in limiting cuts to some programs that serve poor people. Mandatory programs like SNAP (food stamps) and child nutrition programs, low-income working tax credits, Medicaid and children’s health insurance, Social Security have been spared every time a bill is passed to reduce the deficit.

We can just cut spending and reduce the deficit, right?

One key reason federal revenue is low is because millions of people are out of work or underemployed. Putting people back to work in decent jobs must be a primary goal of any deficit reduction plan. As the Circle of Protection says, “restoring growth is a powerful way to reduce deficits.”

Another possible source of revenue is looking to cut spending in programs that disproportionately favor more affluent and powerful interests, such as spending on agricultural subsidies. Congress should consider redirecting agriculture subsidies away from wealthy and industrial farmers to smaller farmers in need and to hungry people.

The bishops have consistently called for balanced and thoughtful deficit reduction that “calls for shared sacrifice by all, eliminates unnecessary spending, addresses the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly, and raises adequate revenues.”

Advocacy for People Living in Poverty

Over the last few years, Congress has been seized by polarization, operating from deadline to deadline and short-term remedies. This increases cynicism about our political process.

Congress faces multiple deadlines that all pose potential threats to antipoverty programs: across-the-board spending cuts (sequestration); the end of the current fiscal year; and the budget for the next fiscal year.

Budget cuts--whether through sequestration or the normal appropriations process--threaten many effective and efficient domestic antipoverty programs. These programs are vital to providing vital human services to people living in poverty as well as creating healthier families and communities.

Federal housing assistance reduces the poverty rate by 1%, making it a very effective antipoverty tool. Unfortunately, only 25% of eligible households receive help. This extraordinary unmet need for **affordable housing and community development programs** means these programs should be supported, not cut.

Over 16 million children live in food-insecure households. The **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** reduces poverty by 1.5%, **School Lunches** reduce child poverty by 1%; and **other programs such as Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and emergency food assistance (EFSP)** similarly help families and young children meet basic human needs and protect them from the scourge of hunger.

Close to 23 million Americans are still unemployed or underemployed. Many of the jobs created since the end of the recession have been low-paying, and forecasts for future job growth are concentrated in low-wage industries. Decent work at a just wage is a human right because it allows workers to form families and contribute to the common good, so Congress must protect **workforce development programs** that help put people back to work. **Low-income tax credits for working poor families** are the most potent tool the government has for fighting child poverty--in 2011 alone, lifting 4.4 million children out of poverty.

Over 48 million people in America lack health care coverage. Increased health care costs are major drivers of the nation's deficits and debt, and adjustments will be needed over time; however we must not deny care to the most vulnerable among us. **Medicare** can be reformed in ways that do not harm those who depend on the health care coverage it provides, especially seniors with modest means. Any savings in **Medicaid** should avoid changes that harm low-income beneficiaries either directly, by cutting benefits or eligibility, or indirectly by shifting costs to states. Similar programs that promote health, including **child and maternal health initiatives and community health centers**, are also vital supports for some of the most vulnerable Americans.

What programs reduce poverty in your community and help people live in dignity?

Where can I find more information on poverty in America?

Visit: usccb.org/about/domestic-social-development
Povertyusa.org and Pobrezausa.org (Spanish)

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