

**TESTIMONY OF THE NEW YORK STATE  
CATHOLIC CONFERENCE**

**REGARDING THE 2014-2015  
PUBLIC PROTECTION BUDGET**

**PRESENTED ON BEHALF OF  
THE COUNCIL OF CATHOLIC CHARITIES DIRECTORS  
BY  
EARL EICHELBERGER  
DIRECTOR FOR CATHOLIC CHARITIES  
NYS CATHOLIC CONFERENCE**

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## **Introduction**

Good afternoon! My name is Earl Eichelberger and I have the pleasure of serving as the Director for Catholic Charities at the New York State Catholic Conference. The New York State Catholic Conference represents the Roman Catholic Bishops of the eight dioceses of New York State in matters of public policy. In the human services arena, the expertise, experience and advice of the Council of Catholic Charities Directors guides the Conference. The Catholic Church is the largest not-for-profit provider of education, health care and human services in the state. Catholic Charities programs exist in all eight dioceses to provide services to people in need. Our Catholic tradition compels us to be active participants in the civic life of our community, to fashion a more just world that upholds the dignity of every individual and to serve those in need. A key measure of any society is how the most vulnerable members are cared for; those with the greatest need require the greatest response.

## **Background**

In 1917, recognizing the significant role of the Catholic Church's charitable efforts to serve the poor in our State, the New York State Legislature passed a Special Act formally incorporating Catholic Charities agencies in each of the eight Dioceses in New York State. Catholic Charities in New York State provides services valued at more than \$1.7 billion. We annually provide approximately 1.3 million services to persons of all faiths and all age categories in each of the state's 62 counties, and have a long-term commitment to both inner-city and rural communities.

As the charitable human services arm of the Catholic Church, Catholic Charities works closely with the 1,500 parishes (with some 7.3 million parishioners) located in every community throughout the state.

## **Proposed Executive Budget**

The Executive Budget calls for an appropriation of \$2.8 billion for the Department of Corrections and Community Services. This is a decrease of \$280 million from last year. Some of the decrease reflects the planned closing of four additional prisons that were approved in last year's budget and the continued decline in the state prison population under custody. It is commendable that New York is managing to reduce the size of the prison population at the same time that it works to reduce crime in the state. It is anticipated that DOCCS were reduce bed capacity by 1,324 beds with a net savings of \$30 million this year. We, however, believe that we continue to incarcerate more individuals than necessary and this is an area of potential savings in future state budgets. Ultimately, public safety will be enhanced by attention to the root causes of crime, including poverty, poor education, family breakdown, alcohol and substance abuse, racism, and society's increasing acceptance of violence.

The Executive Budget proposes the appropriation of \$10.6 million for Alternatives to Incarceration programs to be allocated on a competitive basis. We believe initiatives of this type save money by reducing the cost of recidivism. Likewise, money spent on re-entry programs also gives previously incarcerated individuals a greater likelihood of successful community reintegration.

Public protection requires, from our perspective, the upholding of the sanctity and dignity of every human life. This would include efforts to heal and restore both victims of crime and those who perpetrate crimes. Respecting the innate dignity of those who commit crime is essential to restoring them to wholeness and to society. The treatment of those who are convicted of crime must be humane.

Currently there are a growing number of old, feeble and infirmed individuals incarcerated in the New York State correctional system. These individuals experience additional suffering as a result of their physical deterioration, and are an extraordinary drain on state resources, because of their special needs and medical expenses. Careful screening and release under supervision in the community would ensure that those released pose minimal or no risk to public safety. Compassion and fiscal economy are both advanced by the practical accommodation of earlier, but controlled, release to the community. Bills have been previously introduced in both house to institute such a program and we encourage your support for compassionate and fiscal reasons.

The NYS Department of Corrections and Community Supervision and its predecessor have historically operated some cells that segregate incarcerated individuals for periods of time for disciplinary and administrative purposes. In recent years the state has expanded and developed new "Special Housing Units" (SHUs) where individuals spend 23 hours a day in their cells. The successful management of correctional facilities depends in part upon the ability of correctional officers and administration to maintain discipline and respond to violation of facility rules. We, however, question the conditions under which SHUs are operated, the extent of their use and the extended time that they are used. It is of particular concern when individuals who suffer from serious mental illness are placed in disciplinary confinement. The incidents of self-harm and suicide while in disciplinary confinement is alarming. There have been a number of programs in cooperation with the Office of Mental Health developed to address these concerns. Continued monitoring and refinement of these programs is required. We are encouraged that there seems to be movement toward making changes to the department's use of SHUs. Prior to his departure the prior Commissioner had promised to study this issue and make changes as deemed appropriate. The courts and the legislature also appear to be poised to require changes.

Among our many ministries is our prison ministry. This is an area where we have provided services to those incarcerated and those returning to the community from

incarceration. In addition to these direct services, we have provided advocacy on behalf of those who experience incarceration and those who have been victimized by crimes that may lead to incarceration. Strides are being made to improve the criminal justice system, but clearly there is more work to be done. If done correctly it also creates the possibility of saving the state significant sums of money over time.

A Commission on Youth, Public Safety and Justice is proposed in the Executive Budget. This commission will be charged with making recommendations on how best to raise the age of adult criminal responsibility, improve outcomes for youth and promote safety. New York is only one of two states that treat 16 -18 year olds as adults in the criminal justice system. We support this initiative.

Gun violence is a continuing concern in our state. We believe the proposed shifting of \$15.2 million to the Gun-Involve Violence Elimination (GIVE) Initiative helps to bring focus to this problem. This, along with continued funding of SNUG at current levels, will hopefully be of assistance in reducing gun violence in our state.

In the Catholic Bishops of New York's Pastoral Statement of more than a dozen years ago, entitled "Restoring All to the Fullness of Life", it was stated that "Our system of corrections should be just that: a system designed to correct, not only the wrongdoing of offenders, but also the causes of their wrongdoing. It must serve the goal of restorative justice, healing the victims of crime, offering rehabilitation and re-integration to those convicted of crime, and restoring safety to a society destabilized by crime." Support for victims of crimes and the compassionate treatment of those convicted of crime are both consistent with this view and affirm the sanctity and dignity of each human life.

Public Protection also encompasses disaster relief efforts. Catholic Charities has been a partner with government in providing disaster relief for many years. Our presence in communities across the state and our ongoing services to communities in need positions us well to respond in these circumstances. Support for "Super-storm" Sandy recovery and rebuilding efforts, as well as the earlier need to address the impact of Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee, have been a real challenge. As the state recognizes the need to gear up to address future disasters, we stand ready to assist. We have partnered with the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) in providing individual, community-based case management in order to give those in need information, services, advocacy, referrals, benefit coordination and ongoing practical and emotional support. This initiative has provided Catholic Charities an opportunity to partner with the state and other non-profit providers in 34 counties in an effort to help those suffering from the effects of recent storms to rebuild their lives with compassion and dignity. In addition to rebuilding structures and infrastructure there is a human services side to disaster relief that is also important.

## **Conclusion**

It is our hope that humane and wise decisions will be made to deal with the current budget balancing effort. The State Legislature has a history of identifying services that are essential to their constituents and finding a way to address those needs. We can achieve a budget that also affirms the dignity of all of our state's people. We stand ready to work with you to accomplish this objective.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts and concerns as the Legislature reviews the difficult choices that are ahead.