



## *New York State Catholic Conference*

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Testimony  
of the  
New York State Catholic Conference  
regarding the  
2021 – 2022  
Human Services Budget

Submitted by:  
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Senator Krueger, Assembly Member Weinstein, distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly.

My name is Dennis Poust, and I am the interim executive director of the New York State Catholic Conference. The Catholic Conference advocates for issues of importance to the New York State Council of Catholic Charities Directors, the policy board for Catholic Charities and its programs operating in all 62 counties of this state. Catholic Charities' 400 human services agencies from every region of the state serve the poor and vulnerable, aged and infirm, immigrants and refugees, people with developmental and physical disabilities, people with mental illness, people with HIV/AIDS, those suffering from addiction, people and families who are homeless or facing housing insecurity, people who do not have enough food to feed their families, and many others. For more than 100 years, Catholic Charities has partnered with New York State in providing services, and it remains the largest non-governmental provider of human services in the state.

With such incredible need in these unprecedented times, we understand you must do your best to triage the issues, focusing first and foremost on the preservation of human life, caring for those who are ill, vaccinating millions of people in a socially equitable way, helping to preserve businesses, ensuring the education of children, making sure people have the basic necessities of life such as food and housing...the list goes on.

First and foremost, I wish to thank you, members of the state Legislature, for your tireless work on behalf of New Yorkers in the face of a pandemic unlike anything we have seen in our lifetimes. Please know that the Catholic Bishops of New York State continue to pray for all of our elected leaders as you address these challenges, which have impacted the lives of literally every New Yorker in ways large and small.

We, too, have been impacted by the pandemic. Catholic Charities relies on a combination of government contracts, support from sponsoring Catholic dioceses, and donations from individuals, corporations and foundations to do the work that must be done to allow all of God's children to live lives of dignity and to access basic human needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on our ability to fund raise. On top of that, Catholic dioceses across the state were suffering serious financial constraints even before the pandemic closed churches for months last year. Meanwhile, the economic uncertainty, job loss, and housing and food insecurity of so many New Yorkers has only increased the need for services. All of this makes the state's investment in the human services programs provided by Catholic Charities ever more critical.

### **Full reimbursement for Contracts**

The 20% withholding on reimbursements for state contracts has caused significantly more uncertainty in our ability to maintain programs, avoid laying off our workers and serve New Yorkers in need. The Governor has indicated the withholding will be paid down in the last quarter of this fiscal year, which is good news. However, he has said the state will continue to withhold 5% of money that is owed through our contracts. While 5% is better than 20%, it is still a significant amount of money, a loss that human services providers simply cannot withstand. What's more, the Executive Budget calls for a continuation of the 5% withhold into FY 2022

unless the state gets a best-case scenario federal aid package. We urge the state to honor its contracts and fully reimburse for services already delivered to your constituents, and those that will be in the future.

### **Human Services Workforce**

If nothing else, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused us to collectively grow in our appreciation for the essential workforce. While much attention has rightly focused on health care workers, grocery workers, first responders and the like, we must not forget the human services workforce, who do heroic work day in and day out, while being among the lowest paid sector of employees in New York State due to disinvestment in human services over the last decade.

Consider these numbers:

- 60 percent of the human services workforce qualifies for some form of public assistance
- 11 years have passed since the state provided an across-the-board cost of living adjustment
- 80 percent of the state's human services workforce is female and 50 percent are people of color
- 39 percent of New York human services organizations have less than three months of cash on hand
- 68 percent of these organizations anticipate not being able to meet the demands for services by their communities

Every one of you have constituents served by Catholic Charities and other human services providers. I know you want to be sure that they have access to the services they need and deserve. The state's deep commitment to vulnerable populations is truly what will make New York the progressive leader in the country. Yes, hard decisions must be made in times of fiscal austerity. But we must not balance the budget on the backs of the poor and vulnerable. Programs are at risk and the needs of New Yorkers are in danger of going unmet if we do not begin to reverse the trend we are in.

We ask that the state use a portion of any additional federal aid received to allow human services workers to get emergency pay for the essential work they are providing during the pandemic.

### **Nourish New York**

Among the most heart-wrenching images of the pandemic, aside from the unimaginable toll of death and serious illness, are the incredible lines of cars stretching as far as the eye can see, queuing up for Catholic Charities-sponsored food drives. We have seen this in every corner of the state. The level of food insecurity is unlike any we have ever seen. We are very grateful to Governor Cuomo for including an additional \$35 million in the Nourish New York program, for a total investment of \$60 million. Created during the early months of the pandemic, Nourish New York provides funding to food banks to purchase New York State-produced farm products, which are then made available to neighbors in need through local food pantries and cupboards. The program has been a great success and is urgently needed. We strongly encourage you to fully fund the Governor's proposal.

### **Child Care Subsidies**

Child care for working New Yorkers is more urgently needed than ever, with so many students across the state learning virtually at home, rather than in school. We are grateful that the Governor has maintained these child care subsidies at \$832 million, and urge you to accept or even increase that figure. The budget also includes a legislative proposal (ELFA Article VII, Part Z) to implement recommendations of the Child Care Availability Task Force to expand child care affordability and to ease administrative burdens on child care providers. The proposal seeks to expand affordability by limiting the co-payment of a family receiving child care services to no more than 20% of their income above the poverty level (\$40 million in federal funds); it provides \$6 million (federal funds) for start-up grants to create programs in child care deserts and wage supports for programs located in child care deserts; and removes unnecessary or duplicative administrative burdens on child care providers. We are supportive of all efforts to expand quality child care.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, allow me to thank you for considering this testimony. Budgets are moral documents and reflect our priorities as a society. Catholic social teaching reminds us to always keep the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable at the forefront of our minds and our actions. As you make decisions in this budget, I pray you will also ask first and foremost how the budget impacts those on the margins.

I leave you with the words of Pope Francis in his [message for the Fourth World Day for the Poor](#) on November, 15, 2020, which had the theme, “Stretch Forth Your Hands to the Poor”:

*A hand held out is a sign; a sign that immediately speaks of closeness, solidarity and love. In these months, when the whole world was prey to a virus that brought pain and death, despair and bewilderment, how many outstretched hands have we seen! The outstretched hands of physicians who cared about each patient and tried to find the right cure. The outstretched hands of nurses who worked overtime, for hours on end, to look after the sick. The outstretched hands of administrators who procured the means to save as many lives as possible. The outstretched hands of pharmacists who at personal risk responded to people’s pressing needs. The outstretched hands of priests whose hearts broke as they offered a blessing. The outstretched hands of volunteers who helped people living on the streets and those with a home yet nothing to eat. The outstretched hands of men and women who worked to provide essential services and security. We could continue to speak of so many other outstretched hands, all of which make up a great litany of good works. Those hands defied contagion and fear in order to offer support and consolation.*

*This pandemic arrived suddenly and caught us unprepared, sparking a powerful sense of bewilderment and helplessness. Yet hands never stopped reaching out to the poor. This has made us all the more aware of the presence of the poor in our midst and their need for help. Structures of charity, works of mercy, cannot be improvised. Constant organization and training is needed, based on the realization of our own need for an outstretched hand.*