



New York State Catholic Conference

THE OFFICIAL PUBLIC POLICY VOICE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE EMPIRE STATE

DENNIS POUST, *EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR*

Testimony
of the
New York State Catholic Conference
regarding the
2022 – 2023
Human Services Budget

Submitted by:
Dennis Poust
Executive Director
NYS Catholic Conference

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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 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.

Human Services Workforce

Human services workers are some of the great heroes of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the essential work that they do, they are among the lowest paid employees in New York State. Sixty percent of the human services workforce qualifies for public assistance. They have long gone without an across-the-board cost of living adjustment. Human services workers in the state are eighty percent female and fifty percent people of color. Catholic Charities and other human services workers throughout New York provide critical support to communities every single day. We are thrilled to see a 5.4% COLA included in the Governor's budget proposal. It is our fervent wish that you support it.

Refugee Resettlement

Catholic Charities is proud to assist some of our most vulnerable brothers and sisters through the Refugee Resettlement Services Program. These refugees are often escaping unimaginable horror. The help that we provide to them in terms of social and economic adjustments, self-sufficiency, and community is so important. As you know, the situations in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the world have rendered this need extremely critical. We are very grateful that the Governor's budget proposal includes \$2 million for refugee resettlement. Because the need is so great, we strongly encourage you to increase that figure.

Child Care Subsidies

Childcare continues to be a critical issue for working New Yorkers. Students in some areas are still learning virtually at home and COVID-19 protocols trigger school closures and quarantine periods. Workers are returning to the workforce or making career changes due to a rebounding economy. We are grateful that the Governor has called for 400,000 more New York State families to be eligible for childcare subsidies and urge you to accept or even increase that figure. We are supportive of all efforts to increase eligibility for quality childcare in New York.

Housing

Homelessness and housing insecurity were urgent issues before the pandemic, but COVID-19 continues to exacerbate them. Middle-income families, those struggling with mental illness, and the poor are all facing a crisis when it comes to staying in their homes. Catholic Charities programs are critical in serving the needs of these populations. Governor Hochul has proposed a \$25 billion, five-year housing plan which will create or preserve 100,000 units of affordable housing, including 10,000 units of supportive housing. It is our hope that you will accept these plans.

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 Fifth World Day for the Poor](#) on November 14, 2021, which had the theme, "The poor you will always have with you":

Christ's Gospel summons us to display special concern for the poor and to recognize the varied and excessive forms of moral and social disorder that are generating ever new forms of poverty. There seems to be a growing notion that the poor are not only responsible for their condition, but that they represent an intolerable burden for an economic system focused on the interests of a few privileged groups. A market that ignores ethical principles, or picks and chooses from among them, creates inhumane conditions for people already in precarious situations. We are now seeing the creation of new traps of poverty and exclusion, set by unscrupulous economic and financial actors lacking in a humanitarian sense and in social responsibility.

Last year we experienced yet another scourge that multiplied the numbers of the poor: the pandemic, which continues to affect millions of people and, even when it does not bring suffering and death, is nonetheless a portent of poverty. The poor have increased disproportionately and, tragically, they will continue to do so in the coming months. Some countries are suffering extremely severe consequences from the pandemic, so that the most vulnerable of their people lack basic necessities. The long lines in front of soup kitchens are a tangible sign of this deterioration. There is a clear need to find the most suitable means of combating the virus at the global level without promoting partisan interests. It is especially urgent to offer concrete responses to those who are unemployed, whose numbers include many fathers, mothers, and young people. Social solidarity and the generosity which many, thanks be to God, have shown are, together with far-sighted projects of human promotion, making a most important contribution at this juncture.