

A Moral Challenge

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As a Bishop of 115 Oregon congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and Executive Director of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, a statewide association of denominations, congregations and faith-based community ministries, we join with many religious leaders from the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Unitarian and other faith traditions to issue a moral challenge to our state elected officials. We are calling on our legislators to reverse course on proposed budget cuts to the *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families* (TANF) program.

TANF serves 50,000 Oregon children in 30,000 Oregon families. These are families in deep poverty that depend on TANF to provide a modest monthly cash stipend to help with basic expenses while they pursue employment, job training, or educational opportunities that will allow them to become self-sufficient.

The proposed 2011-2013 Oregon State budget calls for a \$11.6 million cut in the TANF program. This is not right. As people of faith we have a God-given responsibility to care for the most fragile in society. *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families* makes real this commitment. Please consider the following:

- TANF helps children listen to their teachers rather than their stomachs, and keeps them doing their homework at home, rather than in a homeless shelter, motel, or family car.
- TANF helps keep pregnant mothers and their babies healthy by connecting them to services such as WIC, which provides vital nutrition for young children.
- TANF is an essential component in any effective strategy to stabilize families that are at-risk for hunger and homelessness.

TANF often supports families through short-term crisis. Many single parents, when they lose a part-time low-wage job, fall into deep poverty but find they are *not* eligible for unemployment benefits. In this kind of situation TANF can be a temporary lifesaver.

TANF also allows intervention to be more than momentary. Currently families are eligible for up to sixty months of TANF assistance during their lifetimes, although the legislative cuts being considered include a new lifetime limit of no more than eighteen months. If enacted, many families would lose the longer-term support that is often vital for families moving from hope to wholeness.

You can't "catch up" with child health or education later on. If we are not to do such things simply because they are the right thing to do, then let us do them because they are in our own self-interest. A prosperous Oregon requires a healthy and well-educated 21st century workforce.

Budgets are moral documents. They reveal priorities, hopes and fears. We know this about our family budgets, and people of faith believe government budgets also reveal the heart of a people.

Please ask the Governor, your senator and your representative to keep TANF fully funded, alive and well. It is important for all of us.