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Interfaith Letter to the Oregon State Legislature on Hunger, Homelessness and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

Monday, May 2, 2011

Senate President Peter Courtney,
House Speakers Bruce Hanna and Arnie Roblan,
Ways and Means Committee and Sub-committee Co-chairs,
and all members of the Oregon State Legislature:

Dear Oregon Legislators:

We are leaders and members of many faith communities in Oregon. We include Bishops and Denominational Executives; Rabbis, Imams and Ministers, and directors of faith-based non-profit agencies.

We write because we are troubled by an estimated \$67.9 million in state General Fund cuts that the Governor's Recommended Budget proposes for *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families* (TANF) and its component programs.¹ These include a proposal to set a new TANF lifetime enrollment limit of eighteen months, in place of the current sixty month limit.² Currently, *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families* (TANF) serves approximately 54,000 children in 30,000 Oregon families.³

Far too many Oregon families are already living in poverty and at risk for hunger and homelessness. One indication of this was the recent announcement by the *Oregon Department of Education* that the number of homeless students in Oregon K-12 public schools has increased **134 percent** over the previous seven years.⁴

During the 2009-10 school year more than 19,000 K-12 students in Oregon were homeless for part or all of the year. These are sobering facts, and ones we must take to heart. And despite important efforts to insure that homeless children continue to attend school the instability of homelessness runs counter to our state's ongoing efforts to improve the educational performance of Oregon students.⁵

¹ This General Fund figure is from the April 6, 2011 presentation by DHS Director Erinn Kelley-Siel and Acting CAF Director Marge Reinhart to the Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Services. This amount of General Fund reduction is associated with a reduction to Total Funds of \$95.44 million.

² The reduction from sixty months to 18-months is estimated in the April 6, 2011 presentation (see footnote 1) to save \$11.6 million in General Fund spending.

³ The exact number for March 2011, according to DHS, was 54,494 children in 30,108 families. To be considered for the program, a family of three can earn no more than \$616 per month, which is currently about 40% of the Federal Poverty Level, though most participating families have no earnings.

⁴ 2009-10 is the most recent year for which there is complete data. See "Oregon Department of Education Releases Homeless Student Count: Highest Numbers on Record," 9/22/2010, available at <http://www.ode.state.or.us/news/announcements/announcement.aspx?=6056>.

⁵ "Evidence suggests strongly that strategies for reducing socio-economic disadvantages in educational attainment that focus on school reform alone are unlikely to be as successful as strategies that combine early

Furthermore, because TANF is the only state program that provides a monthly cash stipend to families with children in deep poverty it is an essential component of an effective strategy to stabilize families at risk for hunger and homelessness. That strategy also includes support for the *Emergency Housing Account*, and for food programs that insure children in Oregon need not go to bed, or to class, hungry.

For these reasons, we call on you to:

1. Reject the proposed cuts to TANF, restore funding for all affected components of the TANF program, and in particular retain the current lifetime enrollment limit of sixty months.
2. Maintain or increase funding for the *Emergency Housing Account*, our most flexible tool for helping individuals and families who are at-risk of homelessness.
3. Maintain or increase funding for programs that address Hunger, such as the *General Fund Food Program*, the WIC and Senior Farm Direct Programs and the free or reduced-price school breakfast program.

We most strongly urge you to restore the \$11.6 million in funding needed to maintain the current sixty-month enrollment cap.⁶ Of the cuts proposed to TANF the 18-month enrollment cap is the only one that will result in otherwise eligible families losing their monthly stipend during the next biennium. Consequently, an 18-month time limit will almost certainly lead to additional families becoming homeless and will likely generate new foster-care placements as well.

We recognize the difficult choices facing Oregon's legislators as you seek to craft a balanced budget for the coming biennium. But we believe the cuts proposed for TANF can be and must be restored, and should be restored without making offsetting reductions to other programs that are also needed to prevent and reduce hunger and homelessness.

It has been said many times that a budget is a moral document, and we agree. The test of our character is our commitment to stand together with our neighbors in need when they need it most.

We thank you for your work on these difficult issues and for your consideration of our viewpoint.

Sincerely,

(All authorized signers are listed below, beginning on next page)

Cc: Governor John Kitzhaber

education programs and K-12 school improvements with efforts to reduce poverty, improve access to health care, and stabilize affordable family housing." See for example the "Broader, Bolder Approach to Education" statements and resources at: <http://www.boldapproach.org/>.

⁶ See footnote 2.

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