

March 2007 1st edition

State Budget Season

Message to Legislators: *Basic needs are priority!*

In every odd-numbered year the State of Wisconsin adopts a two-year budget. The debate about the July 1, 2007 through June 30, 2009 state budget is happening now.

NOW IS THE TIME to let your elected officials know what is important. This document provides background about some issues that Interfaith Conference and CAN have identified as priorities.

In each budget season the process starts with the state's governor. The governor proposed a two-year budget and submits it to the State Legislature (this year's budget is more than 1,700 pages long and includes over \$57 billion in spending and revenue).

The legislature re-crafts the budget via the Joint Finance Committee. This committee is always comprised of an equal number of members from the Assembly and Senate. Given that the Senate is

controlled by one party and the Assembly by the other, the Joint Finance Committee has an 8-8 makeup in terms of party affiliation.

Several Milwaukee-area legislators are on this very important and influential committee. Included are Sen. Alberta Darling, Sen. Lena Taylor, Sen. John Lehman (Racine), Rep. Jeff Stone, and Rep. Pedro Colon.

Once the Finance Committee is finished each chamber of the legislature can then change the budget. It eventually passes both houses (we hope!), sometimes after a "Conference Committee" representing both houses hammers out a compromise. It then returns to the governor for approval, veto, or partial ("line-item") vetoes. It is a long and complicated process. But it is a process that needs public input about priorities.

Priority Issues— 2007 Please use this as a guide for raising issues with legislators

W-2 welfare reform continues

The Interfaith Conference and our advocacy program CAN have monitored W-2 for a long time. It has always been our position that any welfare reform should seek first to help people escape poverty, not simply push them off of welfare. Too often W-2 has left people in poverty with little hope for a better future.

That is why we are very pleased to see that several important modifications to the W-2 program are included in the 2007-2009 budget. W-2 is now ten years old. When it was launched it was a first-of-its-kind, revolutionary program. We respectfully submit that any radically different government program is likely due for fine tuning, at the least, after ten years.

We support, and encourage you to let your legislators

know that you support, the extension of the work exemption to 26 weeks. This provides new mothers more time with their child and saves child care costs. We also strongly support eligibility for women in their third trimester of pregnancy who have medically-fragile pregnancies. Today they are not eligible for financial support. This is something we have advocated for several years after hearing from shelters for women about some very difficult and sometimes very sad circumstances.

We also support the "Real Work for Real Pay" proposal. We firmly believe that for many people real world, actual work experience can be far more beneficial than W-2 community service jobs. This proposal will make it far more likely that an employer will provide such opportunity.

People of Faith. Together. Making a Difference

Housing Trust Fund

The Interfaith Conference had the great pleasure over the past two years of working closely with the Milwaukee Housing Trust Fund. We were successful in seeing the city of Milwaukee establish a new affordable housing trust fund. That is why we are very excited to see that the budget includes the creation of a state housing trust fund that will provide support to local communities. We support the increase in the Real Estate Transfer Fee as a means to support affordable housing throughout the state. We believe that new dollars (such as these) should support only new initiatives in this area. Legislators need to know that we want current funding for housing to continue as is, with this new support going toward new and/or additional things. Also, we support the Governor's proposal to allow local Tax Incremental Financing Districts to be extended in order to support affordable housing efforts.

Incarceration

If we want to end the cycle of offense, incarceration, re-offense and further incarceration we must address underlying causes, including addiction. For many years CAN has supported "Treatment Instead of Prison" as an effective way to address substance abuse and prevent costly (in many ways) incarceration. The Governor's budget includes about \$700,000 per year for Treatment Instead of Prison. This is good news but does not go nearly far enough. We urge the state to go well-beyond the budget proposal and fully fund treatment alternatives. This wise option should be available to anyone eligible and should be widely available to judges and prosecutors as a tool.

Child Care

We are very concerned about proposed changes to the Wisconsin Shares child care assistance program. This program provides child care subsidies to low-income workers so that they can afford to go to work.

We do not support the proposed increase in the parent's co-payment. We are also very concerned about the prospect of waiting lists, as has been proposed. Imagine looking for work in the low-wage marketplace and then telling a prospective employer that you cannot start for several weeks due to a waiting list for child care help.

We have to wonder; why is it that when the state has to tighten its belt the same populations always feel the squeeze?

This program is expensive, yes. But in this post-welfare, low-wage world, it is essential for many working parents.

Health Care reform

The Interfaith Conference is paying close attention to the matter of health care access and insurance access. This year we hope to see the state take significant steps toward ensuring that all Wisconsin residents are adequately covered. The Interfaith Conference has always strongly supported the state's BadgerCare program. Gov. Doyle has proposed expansion of this program to include more people.

The proposed *BadgerCare Plus* is an important step in the right direction. Many childless workers lose jobs due to health issues or are unable to afford basic insurance. The proposal to include such individuals, and the inclusion of children whose families currently cannot afford insurance, moves us forward in helping families and workers to stabilize in their jobs and live healthier lives.

Contacting State Elected Officials

Legislative Hotline: 1-800-362-9472

(can get you direct numbers, tell you who your legislators are, take messages for legislators)

Senators: P.O. Box 7882, Madison 53707

State Reps: P.O. Box 8952 (Rep's last names A-L)
P.O. Box 8953 (Rep's last names M-Z)
Madison 53708

**To find email addresses (or to identify your representatives in Madison) visit:
www.legis.state.wi.us**

Governor Jim Doyle:
P.O. Box 7863
Madison, WI 53702
1-608-266-1212

