



# Seeds of Justice

Sowers of Justice Newsletter

June 2009

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## The 2009 Legislative Session "Ain't Over Till It's Over"

While May 18<sup>th</sup> marked the final day of the 2009 legislative session, it did not offer a resolution to our state's \$6.4 billion deficit for 2009-10. There was no agreement on the months-long showdown between the legislature and the Governor over revenues or budget cuts. Yogi Berra's quote, "It ain't over till it's over" certainly rings true; in fact, the only thing we know for sure at the time of this writing is that - it ain't over!

After months of committee hearings and negotiations, the legislature was taken by surprise with the Governor's announcement that he would not call a special session. Rather, the Governor plans to "unallot" nearly \$3 billion dollars from the bills that the legislature sent him. Unallotment is a power granted to the Governor when there is a budget deficit that needs correcting.

This power has been used four times in state history, and two of those were by Governor Pawlenty in 2003 and 2008. In the past, unallotment has always occurred in the final months of the two year budget cycle when corrective action has been required to balance the books because of revenue shortfalls or emergency expenditures. The most that has ever been unallotted was \$281 million dollars in 2003. Governor Pawlenty will announce his plan to unallot \$2.7 billion before the new biennium starts July 1<sup>st</sup>.

This use of the unallotment process is setting a new precedent for executive

power. Never before has a Governor used this power to essentially create a budget without the approval of the legislature.

While the process may be fascinating, this budget is about people. It's about health care, nursing homes, public schools, universities and funding for local governments to hire police officers and firefighters and to provide the services the people of this state expect. Pending unallotments will be far-reaching and painful. Hospitals have announced that they will have to lay off 7,500 health care workers as tens of thousands are removed from public health care programs. People with disabilities and the elderly will lose caretaking services. Student tuition will continue to rise.

The most devastating cut at the time of this writing was the veto of the entire second year funding (\$381 million) of General Assistance Medical Care (GAMC). As you will read in this edition of SEEDS, GAMC truly serves the poorest of the poor in our state, and most of the funding goes toward critical mental health care for vulnerable men and women.

Over 350 clients of Catholic Charities in St. Paul/Minneapolis are recipients of GAMC. We know that the impact of these cuts will go way beyond health care. Many clients will lose their medications, for mental and physical illness.

Quite possibly this could lead to destabilizing their housing situation. Public safety resources will be stretched even thinner, and the costs for uncompensated hospital care will skyrocket. While the outlook is grim, the Office for Social Justice and our allies will fight to avoid these scheduled cuts over the coming year.

While we don't know the exact impact of unallotment at this time, low-income advocates ended the session with some important legislative victories by protecting the most vulnerable from the worst of the cuts.

Despite \$500 million in Health and Human Services cuts, low-income advocates managed to protect health care coverage for some of those living in poverty, supported proven welfare-to-work initiatives, and even add 22,000 previously uninsured children to MinnesotaCare.

The infusion of federal stimulus dollars helped protect against major losses to health care for low-income families, added much needed funding to the state's child care assistance program, and will train low-income men and women in the emerging green job sector.

The victories that we achieved this session were the result of Minnesotans like you who showed up to voice support for a Minnesota that invests in its most precious commodity - its people. It was encouraging to see so many people defending the common good in these tough economic times.

It is precisely in times like these where the true character of our state shines through. Minnesota has been a leader in the past, but it will require new revenue and disciplined budgeting priorities to reclaim that position.

The budget must be balanced by July 1<sup>st</sup>. Without new revenue, the cuts will be deep, painful and reverberate across the entire state. Yogi Berra, always good for a quotable saying, said "when you come to a fork in the road, take it". Minnesota is now coming to that fork in the road, and much is at stake. Unfortunately one fork may lead us to a place we really don't want to go. Which direction will we choose?

**Patrick Ness**

*Public Policy Manager*

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### The Session Recap

#### **Housing & Homelessness**

*AGENDA ITEM: Protect and expand operating dollars for housing programs.*

\$3 million in supportive housing funds were added to the long term supportive housing budget. However, over 16,000 Group Residential Housing (GRH) recipients will see their personal needs allowance cut by either \$12 or \$32. The new personal needs allowance will fall to \$89 per month.

*AGENDA ITEM: Secure \$8 million in funding for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act.*

\$218,000 for the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act was passed in the HHS Omnibus, as was language that sets aside \$2.5 million in federal stimulus dollars for homeless youth programs focused in greater Minnesota.

*AGENDA ITEM: Allow youth aging out of foster care at 18 to be eligible for health care.* Youth who age out of care will now be automatically eligible for MinnesotaCare and will retain coverage through the age of 21.

# JUS

**"In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing."**

-Theodore Roosevelt

Additionally, children leaving a juvenile residential correctional facility will be automatically eligible for MinnesotaCare and remain eligible for MinnesotaCare until they are 21 years old.

*AGENDA ITEM: Promote programs that transfer ownership of foreclosed homes from lending institutions to those in need of housing.*

New state legislation makes it possible to postpone the sheriff's sale on a house in foreclosure for five months, and cancel the sale if the homeowner can pay the missed payments and become current on the mortgage. Also, homeowners now will be informed of the new date if the sheriff's sale is postponed.

### Health Care and Mental Health Care

*AGENDA ITEM: Move toward universal health care coverage for all children.*

22,000 more children will have access to MinnesotaCare as a result of provisions to reduce cost and administrative barriers. Rules that eliminate premiums for some, eliminate the waiting period for others and allow coverage despite the availability of employer related health coverage will allow more kids to be eligible for MinnesotaCare.

The newly enacted provisions are paid for out of existing resources in the Health Care Access Fund, which pays for MinnesotaCare, but is under threat of unallotment by the Governor. These changes are a strong step toward the Minnesota Health Security Act (HF 174/SF 9), legislation that would ensure all Minnesotans have access to affordable health care coverage, starting with children.

*AGENDA ITEM: Expand access to community-based mental health care.*

Grants to counties, inpatient mental health, and provider rates for mental health services were not cut. Although, approximately 70% of the people who will no longer have access to GAMC have a mental illness, chemical dependency or both.

*AGENDA ITEM: Engage the entire state (and all stakeholders) in meaningful deliberations that will produce a health care plan that provides universal health coverage for all Minnesotans.*

The challenge of the 2009 session was the overarching budget shortfall that placed a wide assortment of public service programs at risk. Programs funded by the Health and Human Services budget, particularly programs that impact people living in poverty and crisis are at continued risk of elimination by the unallotment power of the Governor. This is an ongoing conversation, but the following were challenges and successes from the 2009 session that should be noted:

- The Governor eliminated all funding for the General Assistance Medical Care (GAMC) program effective July 1, 2010 through use of a line-item veto. GAMC currently provides basic health care to over 30,000 adults with annual incomes below \$7,800. Over 70% of GAMC recipients receive mental health services.
- Dental coverage for adults covered under Medical Assistance will now be more limited. For children, all medically necessary dental services continue to be allowed.

tics

**"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."**

**- Martin Luther King, Jr.**

## Legislative Summary

- The Commissioner of Human Services and local county agencies must develop a streamlined application and enrollment system as well as an online application form for the Medical Assistance (MA) and MinnesotaCare programs.
- Parents of children who fail to submit renewal forms and related documentation in a timely manner will continue to remain eligible for the program if the Commissioner can determine through other means there has been no change in income. However, if the Commissioner determines there is a premium change, the family must be notified. If the family then fails to pay the premium, the children must be un-enrolled.

### **Criminal Justice**

*AGENDA ITEM: Health care and transition services that assist inmates and ex-offenders with mental illness.*

Cutting the General Assistance Medical Care (GAMC) program will impact ex-offenders with mental illness. The Governor's line-item veto of GAMC means people in jails will no longer receive GAMC. Cuts to GAMC mean that health care costs will be passed along to local units of government, and by extension, paid for through property taxes. Also, ex-offenders who transition out of incarceration will no longer be able to get health care through GAMC.

*AGENDA ITEM: Develop "certificates of rehabilitation" for ex-offenders, allowing them expanded access to jobs, employment, and educational opportunity.*

The "Ban the Box" provision of the Public Safety Policy bill requires all Minnesota public employers (state, local, and county government) to wait until a job applicant has been selected for an interview before asking about criminal records or conducting a criminal record check, except for positions that already require a background check. Passage of this legislation makes Minnesota the first state to adopt a statewide "Ban the Box" law. This law does not apply to private employers, but we hope they will begin to see it as a "best practice" model.

*AGENDA ITEM: Support legislation that offers liability protection to private employers that employ ex-offenders.*

The "Safe Hiring" provision limits the admission of evidence of an employee's criminal record against an employer if a court order sealed any record of the criminal case or the record did not result in a criminal conviction. This law will require some outreach and training of employers on how it can help them safely increase employment opportunities for individuals with criminal records.

### **Jobs**

*AGENDA ITEM: Pass an emergency jobs act.*

Advocates pushed for \$100 million dollars for an emergency jobs program similar to a program in the 1980's economic downturn. A modest appropriation of \$10 million was included heading into the Economic Development conference committee, but was then stripped from the final bill.



**"Success is going from failure to failure without a loss of enthusiasm."**

**-Winston Churchill**

(Cont'd on page 5)

*AGENDA ITEM: Track the distribution of funds from the Federal Energy Stimulus Bill.*

The Legislature appropriated nearly \$200 million for increased weatherization of low-income homes, energy efficiency, and renewable energy activity from federal energy stimulus funds.

Of that amount, \$2 million will now be allocated for low-income persons to obtain training for green jobs in these sectors. In addition, contracts awarded under the bill must adhere to the disadvantaged business requirements under current Minnesota law.

Finally, the bill specifically directs agencies administering the funds to conduct outreach on the availability of training, jobs and contracts specifically to low-income communities.

*AGENDA ITEM: Raise the minimum wage from \$6.55 to \$8.25 per hour.*

No action was taken this session on raising the state's minimum wage, but the federal minimum wage is scheduled to increase to \$7.25 on July 24<sup>th</sup>.

*AGENDA ITEM: Guarantees a minimum number of paid sick days*

This bill died in committee, but the push continues for similar federal legislation.

### **Child Care & Early Childhood Education**

*AGENDA ITEM: Protect the Child Care Assistance Program from major cuts and work to reduce the waiting list for childcare.*

The Health and Human Services omnibus bill made no cuts to the Child Care Assistance Program and allocated \$8 million in federal stimulus funds to shorten the waiting list for Basic Sliding Fee funds

that help working families afford child care.

The Health and Human Services bill also included funding specifically for improving the quality of child care services. \$1.6 million was allocated to continue the School Readiness Connections pilot program, along with language that links the pilot to the Quality Rating System. \$3.4 million will be used to continue the Family, Friend and Neighbor pilot program, the Parent Aware Quality Rating System Pilot Program, and fund quality improvements for providers to prepare for participating in the Quality Rating System.

We are disappointed that the Health and Human Services bill used \$5.2 million in Basic Sliding Fee funds that were waiting for reallocation to Minnesota counties to help solve the state's budget deficit. These funds went back to the state's general fund and will not be used specifically for child care.

Overall, the bill was strong and signals that legislators recognize that affordable, high-quality child care is a critical investment for Minnesota, especially in a difficult economy.

The Governor also signed the E-12 Education bill, leaving intact all of the early childhood provisions.

Unfortunately he line-item vetoed several items when he signed other major omnibus spending bills. Specifically:

- He signed the Higher Education bill, but line-item vetoed all state funding for TEACH early childhood provider scholarships (\$500,000);

(Cont'd on page 6)



**“All work is as a seed sown; it grows and spreads, and sows itself anew.”**

**-Thomas Carlyle**

## Legislative Summary

- He signed the Bonding Bill, but line-item vetoed \$85 million worth of projects, including \$2 million for Early Childhood Facility Grants.

### Public Assistance

Thanks to the advocacy of many anti-poverty and faith-based groups, a number of proposed cash grant cuts to families in the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) did not move forward.

Two of the proposed cuts included a \$125 per month penalty to MFIP families receiving Supplemental Security Income, and an additional \$50 penalty to MFIP families receiving rental housing subsidies. These cuts would have harmed more than 8,000 low-income families.

*AGENDA ITEM: Protect people from cuts that will leave families poorer or reduce services.*

There will be a reduced “work bonus” for families who have left welfare and found employment. This is due to go into effect in October 2009. The “work bonus” was designed to support families who have left welfare for work with a \$75 a month bonus, which has now been reduced to \$50 a month.

Other cuts will come from funds that provide job counseling and emergency assistance, and determine benefits. These programs will be reduced by \$3.7 million dollars. Finally, regional programs that integrate services for the most challenged families have been eliminated.

*AGENDA ITEM: New legislation that makes MFIP more effective at helping parents find work, and*

*be a safety net when work is not available.*

This new legislation continued funding for “stepping stone” job creation and paid supported work that creates jobs in local communities and allows parents who cannot find jobs in the competitive labor market to work in short-term, skill-building jobs. Unfortunately, the Governor vetoed the funding in the second year of the biennium (July, 2010).

Another provision exempts parents of infants from the work requirements of MFIP until the child is one year old. The former policy was limited to 12 weeks. This saves the state expensive infant child care costs. Additionally, the plan authorizes counties to designate home visiting public health nurses as the MFIP workers for teen parents and seriously ill parents.

The Legislature directed \$25 million in federal stimulus funds to dedicated emergency assistance payments for families facing a housing or utility crisis. This appropriation doubles the amount currently spent across the state and means more than 20,000 additional families will be served.

**Kathleen Tomlin**  
*Director*

**Patrick Ness**  
*Public Policy Manager*

**Adam Robinson**  
*Public Policy Organizer*



**“No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We must learn to see the world anew.”**

**- Albert Einstein**



**“You may never know  
what results come of  
your action,  
but if you do nothing  
there will be no result.”**

**-Mahatma Gandhi**

The mission of the Office for Social Justice is to educate, inspire, and organize Catholic parishioners to make the social teaching of the Church real as they act in the public arena.

Looking back on this past year, how did you and your fellow parishioners act in the public arena? Do you have a relationship with your public policymakers? Are you comfortable advocating and acting in solidarity with people who live in poverty? Are others in your parish acting with you? Do you need some support?

There are many ways to involve yourself and your parish in acting for justice. People and faith communities are at different points on their continuum of involvement in the public arena.

Maybe your parish isn't as aware of the call to be involved beyond the parish in the larger community. A program such as *JustFAITH*, a nine month educational process that brings a small group together weekly for reading, reflecting, and faith sharing, has been known to broaden the perspective about the responsibility to be involved in the larger community.

In addition, Hosting *Understanding Poverty*, a multimedia presentation of the story behind poverty, or deepening the discussion of how to solve the problem of poverty via discussion of the recommendations of the Legislative Commission to End Poverty by 2020 are proven successful approaches to raising awareness and educating parishioners.

Sometimes, we hear there is a group interested in justice in the parish, yet they're experiencing difficulty making things happen.

We've seen justice efforts materialize when parishioners are aided in developing a vision of how their parish would look if folks were more engaged in acting for justice. They subsequently form a solid plan for making that vision a reality!

Do you have a desire to dig deeper into the issues that affect people in poverty? In the U.S., we pay twice as much per capita and have poorer health outcomes than other developed nations, and each year 18,000 people die because they're uninsured.

Maybe, like Thomas Wenski, the bishop of Orlando, you see that “The so-called “illegals” are not so because they wish to defy the law, but because the law does not provide them with any channels to regularize their status in this country – which needs their labor; they are not breaking the law, the law is breaking them.” Burrowing into issues like health care or immigration can help define a way to act for justice.

Knowledge and desire to act for justice occasionally need a boost of how-tos and confidence-builders before real action occurs. Via the District Advocacy Initiative, small groups from like legislative districts had remarkable success in building rapport with their legislators and delivering clear faith messages to protect those in poverty.

To hear more about these and other ways to involve yourself and your parish in acting for justice, just give us a call.

We'd love to help you. It's our mission.

**Cheryl Peterson**  
*Parish Social Justice Manager*



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*Sow for yourselves justice,  
 reap the fruit of faithful  
 love;*

*Break up for yourselves  
 a new field, for it is  
 time to seek the Lord,  
 until the Lord comes  
 and rains down justice  
 upon you.*

Hosea, 10:12



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## MARK YOUR CALENDARS

### **Together: Creating the Culture of Peace**

August 1 All Day  
 Viterbo University—LaCrosse, WI  
[www.franciscancommonventure.org](http://www.franciscancommonventure.org)

### **Kick-Off—Sowers Assembly**

October 8 7:00-9:00 p.m.  
 Location To Be Determined

### **Leadership Social Justice Institute**

November ( exact dates TBA) 7:00-9:00 p.m.  
 Location To Be Determined

### **Sowers Assembly**

December 7 7:00-9:00 p.m.  
 Location To Be Determined

Did you know? Catholic Charities Has A Blog  
*“Raising Voices for a Common Good”*

You can visit the blog by going to  
<http://cctwincities.blogspot.com/>

On June 2, 2009 it was announced that Fr. John Estrem will be stepping down as CEO of Catholic Charities of Saint Paul and Minneapolis.

He has always been passionate about the need for advocacy for the poor, and a strong supporter of advocacy efforts. He once said “Justice is about putting the world in right order. You do that through the political process.”

Catholic Charities remains committed to ensuring voices for advocacy will be heard. We will miss working with Fr. John, but we know that Interim CEO Bob Spinner shares that commitment to serving those most in need by bringing right order to the world.

People living in poverty and crisis need us to stand in solidarity with them, and to raise our voices for justice if we are truly going to end poverty.

### Sign Up

We are always looking for ways to do our part to save the planet. If you would only like to receive SEEDS electronically, please contact our office at 651-291-4477 or [osj@archspm.org](mailto:osj@archspm.org).