

Bishops say economic stimulus must help vulnerable families, the poor

WASHINGTON - Poor families and vulnerable workers should be central priorities in any economic recovery legislation Congress adopts, said the U.S. bishops.

"Low-income families and individuals are experiencing the greatest hardship and have the least capacity to cope in this time of economic crisis," Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., said in a Jan. 28 letter to the House and Senate.

This segment of the population also is more likely to quickly "use these new resources" provided in any stimulus package "to purchase the essentials of life and to help move our economy forward," he said.

Bishop Murphy wrote the letter on behalf of the bishops as chairman of their Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development. A copy of it was released by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office of Media Relations.

"Economic policies that assist and protect 'the least among us' are the right thing to do morally. I believe they are also very effective economically," he said.

"We urge Congress to act quickly and wisely with a constant attention to addressing the human impact and moral dimensions of this recession," he said.

The House Jan. 28 approved an \$819 billion economic recovery package with a 244-188 vote. The Senate was scheduled to begin debate on its version Feb. 2. Its bill provides similar spending outlays.

Among provisions in the House measure were \$145 billion in tax cuts for individuals (\$500 per person) and couples (\$1,000 per couple), \$43 billion to extend unemployment benefits, \$40 billion to subsidize health care insurance for the unemployed, and \$4.7 billion to extend the Earned Income Tax Credit. Other provisions include transportation projects, grants for local school districts, energy-

efficient public housing and college tuition grants.

House Democrats initially pushed to include spending for family planning programs for low-income and temporarily unemployed women, but took it out of the bill before the vote.

Such an expansion of family planning coverage was strongly opposed by the bishops, said Bishop Murphy in his letter, because it would “neglect women’s real needs and serve no legitimate purpose for an economic stimulus package.”

Among provisions the bishops said they wanted to see were:

- Efforts to strengthen and expand the refundable child tax credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit for more poor and working families; a temporary increase in nutrition assistance with more resources for food stamps and the expansion of eligibility for unemployed workers and legal immigrants; and the protection of low-income families from losing Medicaid and social service assistance.
- Increased funding for the federal home energy assistance program for low-income families.
- Extension of unemployment insurance benefits to people in states with disproportionately high unemployment rates.
- Increased funding for a program that helps families avoid eviction or obtain new housing.
- Capitalization of a new housing trust fund, which will employ workers in the construction or rehabilitation of homes for families facing dire situations.
- Creation of jobs for unemployed and underemployed people in private, nonprofit and public sectors that advance important national priorities, reflect good stewardship of resources, and meet urgent and emerging needs, especially in the areas of alternative energy, the environment and infrastructure.

Bishop Murphy said the bishops opposed any provision to require the use of E-verify – an electronic verification system for use by employers – by every organization

receiving funding from the stimulus package.

“This provision could slow down implementation of the package and any subsequent economic recovery, because organizations would have to enroll in, learn and implement the system,” he said.

Bishop Murphy called on lawmakers to avoid partisan or ideological agendas and to focus on the needs of the poor. The House version, however, was passed with no support from Republican members; 11 Democrats also voted against it.

“This is a time to pursue the common good, beginning with help for the families and communities most hurt by this crisis,” Bishop Murphy said.

“I pray that working together you can find the courage, wisdom and skill to build a prosperous economy with greater justice for all,” he said.