

Maryland bishops speak out against poverty

Sounding the alarm about poverty in Maryland, the state's bishops called on Catholics to urge lawmakers to "make decisions, pass legislation and appropriate public money in a manner that is charitable, just and reflective of our shared human dignity."

Writing in a joint statement released Jan. 9, Cardinal-designate Edwin F. O'Brien, Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl and Wilmington Bishop W. Francis Malooly said Maryland's state administrators and members of the General Assembly "have a moral obligation to act justly by enacting laws, appropriating funds and executing policies in a manner that uplifts the most vulnerable."

The bishops, whose three dioceses encompass Maryland, urged Gov. Martin J. O'Malley to propose and the General Assembly to enact a budget that provides "sufficient funding" for social safety net programs - particularly for families with children and persons with disabilities.

"These social safety net programs are important mechanisms for maintaining a civil society in which the vulnerable are included, cared for and loved," they said.

The needs of the poor require that policymakers "work to ensure adequate and affordable housing," they said, "especially in light of record foreclosures and skyrocketing homelessness."

"As Catholics," the bishops said, "we are reminded that housing is a basic human right. Homelessness cannot be ignored."

The bishops said housing should be made accessible to all, including those who use rental assistance and federal housing vouchers.

"Unjust discrimination against these individuals - single adults, retirees, struggling families, returning veterans and persons with disabilities - creates an economic subclass of citizens who do not have equal access to housing simply because they

are poor,” they said.

The bishops noted that Catholics, parishes and institutions such as Catholic Charities and Catholic hospitals take seriously their responsibilities “to empower and uplift those in need.”

Last year, Catholic Charities of Baltimore and Washington served more than 265,000 individuals and families, while Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Wilmington served 120,000 in fiscal year 2011. Maryland’s six Catholic hospitals in 2010 provided more than \$62 million in charity care to the uninsured and underinsured.

The bishops cited statistics that show nearly 700,000 Maryland families receiving food assistance. More than 10,000 Marylanders are experiencing homelessness, according to 2010 estimates. In Baltimore alone, census estimates show one in four residents living in poverty – a 20 percent increase in one year.

The statement is titled “When Did We See You Hungry?” and is available online at catholicreview.org/subpages/economicimpact.aspx.