



2008 Briefing on Affordable Housing

“My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings...”

Background

On a given night, there are about 6,500 adults and 2,700 children who are living in shelter in Minnesota. That doesn't take into account the uncounted number of men, women and youth sleeping outside, doubling up in cramped apartments, or finding shelter in unsafe conditions with strangers or predators. The Wilder Research Center surveyed people without homes in 2006 and found an increase in mental health problems, fewer newcomers to Minnesota, and an increase in the number of ex-offenders. A growing number of older adults, unsheltered youth, and veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan were found in their most recent survey.

About 250,000 cost-burdened Minnesota households are using half or more of their income for housing and this number is growing. For the one-third of these households that earn less than 30% of median income, housing costs often force difficult choices between housing and other necessities. There will be a shortfall of 33,000 affordable housing units for low-income households by 2010 in Minnesota.

Mortgage foreclosures have deeply worsened the problem of homelessness. Hennepin County, in January of this year alone, experienced 711 foreclosures. Ramsey County had 650 in the same month, and the crisis is now spreading to the suburbs and Greater Minnesota. Homeowners and renters are both affected by this surging problem. Foreclosure counselors, emergency shelters and housing services are now being flooded with new requests for assistance.

This year's bonding bill provides an opportunity to increase shelter, transitional and supportive housing capacity by using general obligation bonds and a new special revenue bond. Non-profit charities, under this proposed new bonding structure, would have easier access to funds for building new housing structures, and renovating existing structures.

2008 Legislative Issue

Will the Legislature pass a bonding bill to increase shelter, transitional and supportive housing?

JRLC Position

Every person in our state needs access to safe, secure, affordable housing. JRLC supports greater state investment in affordable housing and homeless prevention programs. Specifically, we should stay on track with Minnesota's Plan to End Long-Term Homelessness and use this year's bonding bill to address capital needs for shelter, transitional, and supportive housing.

Bottom-line

- Support the housing provisions in the Bonding Bill, SF 3295 (Langseth) and HF 380 (Hausman). Both the Senate and House include \$30 million nonprofit revenue bonding authority for shelters, transitional housing, and supportive housing.
- Additionally, support the House's position for \$2 million general obligation bonding authority for shelters, transitional housing, and supportive housing. Conferees are: Representatives Hausman, Wagenius, Solberg, Scalze, Tingelstad; Senators Langseth, Pappas, Tomassoni, Scheid, Koering.



2008 Briefing on Ending Poverty

“However, there should be no poor among you...”

Background

In 2004, 35 religious leaders in Minnesota signed *A Common Foundation: Shared Principles for Work on Overcoming Poverty*. In 2006, with bi-partisan support, our state government created a Legislative Commission to End Poverty by 2020, the first attempt by our state government to study poverty and advance a policy agenda in 20 years. We look forward to the blueprint to end poverty in our state!

Minnesota’s overall poverty rate is about 9%; the rate among children is higher, about 12%. Shamefully, our state recently posted the fastest growth rate of people in deep poverty, that is families living with incomes at or below *half* the poverty guideline.

Federal poverty guidelines are defined by money income, not the cost of basic needs. A family of three living on \$17,170 (poverty guideline for family of three is simply not able to secure housing, buy groceries, obtain child care or other basic necessities, and participate fully in community life. Our current minimum wage, \$6.15, only generates \$12,800 for a full-time worker. Twenty years ago the minimum wage allowed a worker to reach the poverty level for a family of three. The wage floor needs repair.

Minnesota’s welfare reform program, the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) once led the nation as a model for moving parents and caretakers into the workforce with the promise of escaping poverty. We supplemented earnings with enough cash and food assistance so that families got out of poverty and we noticed remarkable things. Families were stronger. Children were more successful in school. People took advantage of schooling and training and our MFIP program invested in their success. But we have starved the MFIP by reducing cash assistance and job training opportunities.

Poverty is much more than money income and draws us to look at the way a myriad of social and economic resources are either withheld or made very difficult to obtain. In Minnesota poverty is much higher in Native American and communities of color and is more geographically segregated than in most other states. Justice requires us to look both at racism and the economics of poverty.

Legislative Issue

The Governor proposes to spend \$92 million of TANF funds (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families federal block grant) on items currently supported by our general fund in order to solve the revenue shortfall. This would extinguish hopes we have to build back the MFIP program by creating paid work experience slots, car repair projects, and extending child care subsidies. The minimum wage bill awaits final passage in the House.

2008 JRLC Position

JRLC supports the exclusive use of TANF funds for welfare-to-work programs, especially education and training opportunities. Boost the minimum wage so a worker can escape poverty for a family of three.

Bottom-line

- Raise minimum wage to \$7.75 on 8/1/08 and to \$7.90 in July, 2009. HF 456 (Rukavina) and SF 875 (Anderson). The Senate passed this bill; bill is on the House floor.
- Do not refinance TANF funds. Use TANF funds to help assist families out of poverty.



2008 Briefing on Health Care

"I will bring health and healing. I will heal my people..."

Background

Minnesota's health care debate is in a crescendo. Calls for reform are coming from diverse quarters, including business, labor, health care providers, non-profits, and religious bodies. The Legislature's Health Care Access Commission has several reform ideas are taking shape. The twin goals of reform efforts are to contain rising costs and to secure coverage for the 340,000 Minnesotans who remain uninsured. The 2008 and 2009 sessions are bound to be very busy on the health care front.

JRLC's interfaith perspective on health care principles and the role of state government is especially important at this time. We insist that health care is a right and that any health care changes must move us toward universal coverage. The human dignity of every person demands no less.

As people of faith we can no longer ignore poor public health, rising costs, growing numbers of uninsured, and deep health disparities by race and income. Deeply held principles, common to Jews, Christians and Muslims, lead us to call for Minnesota to once again lead the way in health care reforms that enhance the common good and justly distribute the abundance God has given us.

When thousands are uninsured or underinsured, when people suffer the consequences of delayed or inadequate care, we all fail in our duty to safeguard the human dignity of our neighbors and we jeopardize the health of everyone in the community. The dignity of human beings and our mutual obligation to one another require community structures that ensure that health care be available and accessible to everyone.

There is a very practical reason for supporting universal health care. Public health research tells us that overall health in a society improves when health disparities are narrowed. In short, having healthy neighbors improves everyone's health status.

Governor Pawlenty's budget proposes to take \$250 million from the Health Care Access Fund to help solve the general fund's revenue shortfall. The Health Care Access Fund is funded by a 2% tax on health care services in order to extend health insurance to those who cannot afford private plans. It is a breach of faith with health care providers and the public to use it for other purposes. Raiding the fund will severely cripple efforts to expand affordable health care coverage.

2008 Legislative Issues

Will the Legislature preserve the Health Care Access Fund and use those funds to increase insurance coverage?

JRLC Position

We seek universal coverage and guaranteed access to comprehensive and quality health care. The state has a primary role to make sure that health care is available to the poor and vulnerable. Public interventions are needed to address health disparities, rising health care costs, and insure basic health services for all.

Bottom-line

- Oppose the Governor's attempt to transfer \$250 million from the Health Care Access Fund.
- Support reform efforts that move us toward universal coverage.



2008 Briefing on Impartial Judiciary

“Able people, such as fear God, lovers of truth, who hate a bribe...”

Background

In the 2002 *White* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down by a 5-4 vote Minnesota’s judicial canon that prohibited candidates from stating their views on “disputed legal and political issues.” Subsequently in 2005, the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals struck down additional Minnesota judicial canons based on the *White* decision.

Following these federal court decisions Minnesota judicial candidates are now able to:

- Announce their views of legal and political issues;
- Announce their party affiliations;
- Seek, accept, and use party endorsements;
- Address party gatherings such as conventions;
- Directly ask for campaign contributions to groups of 20 or more.

Judicial elections in 2006 were the first to be held under the *White* decisions. Several judicial candidates sought, and three candidates obtained, party endorsement. Sample ballots distributed by one party included judicial candidates for the first time. Judicial candidates began raising campaign dollars in unprecedented amounts. One district court candidate in Minnesota raised and spent \$133,000.

With Minnesota’s judicial canon of ethics now decimated Minnesota will become more like other states and experience highly partisan races and escalating fundraising to influence judicial election outcomes. One recent contest took place in Wisconsin in 2007 where \$6 million was spent for an open seat on their Supreme Court. More than half of this amount was spent by special interests, including business groups, unions, and attorneys.

The independent Citizens Commission for the Preservation of an Impartial Judiciary (chaired by Governor Al Quie and known as the “Quie Commission”) and the League of Women Voters in Minnesota have spent the past several months studying the judicial selection process in Minnesota and other states. JRLC joins the Quie Commission and the League of Women voters in calling for a judicial selection system that relies on four steps:

1. Merit Nominations
2. Gubernatorial Appointment
3. Performance Evaluation
4. Voter Retention Elections

2008 Legislative Issue

Will the legislature act to preserve Minnesota’s impartial judiciary?

JRLC Position

JRLC recommends that the state constitution be amended to allow for merit nominations, gubernatorial appointment, performance evaluations, and retention elections.

Bottom-line

- Act this year to preserve Minnesota’s impartial courts. Support HF 3023 (Simon) and SF 2401 (Rest).