

## WSSC 2010 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

### ECONOMIC JUSTICE

#### PRINCIPLES

*Human dignity is respected and the common good is fostered only if human rights are protected and basic responsibilities are met. Every human being has a right to life, the fundamental right that makes all other rights possible, and a right to access to those things required for human decency—food and shelter, education and employment, health care and housing, freedom of religion and family life.*

Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship, USCCB, 2007

Over 37.3 million people, including 13.3 million children, continue to live in poverty in our country. In Washington State 11.7 percent of people live below the federal poverty line. Reducing poverty is a priority. However, as the nation reels from the impact of the economic downturn, those most vulnerable in Washington continue a daily struggle to meet their basic needs. Persons who rely on public support such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or General Assistance-Unemployable (GA-U) find themselves watching costs rise and grants being considered for cuts or elimination. There are more families seeking shelter, lining up at local food banks, and requesting assistance to meet other needs, like clothing, medicine, health care and utilities. Poverty disproportionately affects children and families of color in our country.

**HUNGER:** Hunger programs such as the Emergency Food Assistance Program and school meal programs provide needed access to food for struggling families. Due to the economic downturn, more and more people are coming to food banks and free meal programs, while local and state governments evaluate potential cuts to their funding. Washington State's rate for people who are hungry is almost 5 percent while food insecurity, defined as families who are financially stretched to a point where they cannot be certain all household members will not go hungry, is more than 11 percent.

**LIHEAP:** The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) assists low-income households, particularly those that pay a high proportion of household income in meeting their immediate home energy needs. LIHEAP is a collaboration between the federal and state governments, with funds being allocated based on weather conditions and the number of households living in poverty. Since its inception, LIHEAP annually faces a funding gap, with many eligible households unable to access the assistance.

**LIVING WAGE:** A living wage is a just compensation that is sufficient to provide food, clothing, shelter, healthcare and education for workers and their families. The current minimum wage falls far short of a living wage. Workers who make living wages contribute to society, and do not usually require government funded social services.

**HUMAN TRAFFICKING:** Human trafficking is the third largest crime worldwide because it combines high profit and low risk. Between 600,000 and 800,000 persons, including children are harbored and transported for purposes of slavery or forced bondage, often of a manual labor or sexual nature. In 2003, Washington was the first state to pass a human trafficking law. In 2009, language was adopted requiring employers to provide a disclosure statement to foreign workers clarifying state employment laws. It also mandated the Office of Crime Victims to provide information on recognizing trafficking to certain health professionals. Police officers are often the first to encounter victims of trafficking when enforcing prostitution laws. Increased training is needed to assist them in recognizing victims of human trafficking.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

##### WSSC SUPPORTS:

- Maintaining grants and access to services for TANF and GA-U recipients
- Addressing the disproportionate impact poverty has on families of color
- Maintaining anti-hunger programs
- Increasing financial assistance for LIHEAP
- Establishing living wage policies
- Improving training for law enforcement to recognize victims of human trafficking