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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**BISHOPS URGE CONGRESS TO MAKE THE POOR A PRIORITY IN ECONOMIC RECOVERY LEGISLATION**

WASHINGTON—The U.S. bishops urged Congress to make poor families and vulnerable workers central priorities as Congress adopts an economic recovery legislation. Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, New York, Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), made the call in a January 28 letter to both houses of Congress.

“Low-income families and individuals are experiencing the greatest hardship and have the least capacity to cope in this time of economic crisis,” Bishop Murphy said in the letter, adding that these people are also more likely “to use these new resources quickly to purchase the essentials of life and to help move our economy forward.”

Citing the need to avoid partisan or ideological agendas and to focus on the needs of the poor, Bishop Murphy offered the bishops’ support for aspects of the proposed recovery legislation. These include increasing funds for nutrition assistance through food stamps and other programs, protecting low-income families from losing Medicaid and social service assistance, and extending Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits. He also urged the House to reject measures that regarding contraception and immigration as unnecessary and inconsistent with the purposes of the recovery legislation

Bishop Murphy echoed Pope Benedict XVI’s call to bolster the economy by focusing on the dignity of the human person, adding, “This is a time to pursue the common good, beginning with help for the families and communities most hurt by this crisis.”

FULL TEXT of the Senate version of the letter follows:

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I urge you to make the lives and dignity of poor families and vulnerable workers central priorities as Congress adopts an economic recovery package. Low-income families and individuals are experiencing the greatest hardship and have the least capacity to cope in this time of economic crisis. Low income people are also likely to use these new resources quickly to purchase the essentials of life and to help move our economy forward. 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.

In this crucial moment, Congress should resist pressure to advance ideological or partisan agendas. New measures to expand contraception coverage or prescribe rules for immigrant employment are particularly inappropriate in legislation to promote economic recovery.

Attention to those most affected by the crisis with priority for the poor and vulnerable can restore economic growth by rebuilding hope and opportunity for those who are losing their jobs, their homes, and their chance at a decent life for their families.

Both the House of Representatives and the Senate have begun consideration of different versions of the economic stimulus package entitled *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009*. This legislation includes several measures that reflect a priority for poor and vulnerable people. Unfortunately, in our view, others do not. We urge your consideration of these important provisions:

- We **strongly support** efforts to strengthen and expand the refundable child tax credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit that would offer assistance to millions more poor and working families. These proven vehicles can get resources to those who need them the most and are almost certain to use this help to purchase the essentials of a decent life. It is essential these tax provisions be structured to include those with the fewest resources and the greatest needs.

- We **strongly oppose** the specific sections that target efforts to expand coverage for family planning (and *only* family planning) for low-income and temporarily unemployed women. They neglect women's real needs and serve no legitimate purpose for an economic stimulus package. A non-pregnant woman who loses her job but is ineligible for Medicaid, SCHIP, and other government health care may have an urgent need for basic health care coverage for herself and her family, as well as assistance in finding gainful employment. This focus could even reduce basic health coverage, by cancelling support for "benchmark" and "benchmark-equivalent" health benefits unless they begin including contraceptive coverage. Finally, by covering any other related services *only* if they are "pursuant to" provision of family planning and offered in a "family planning setting," effectively makes family planning clinics (many of which are abortion providers) a necessary entry point into the health care system, ignoring women's genuine needs as well as their moral convictions.

- We **support** efforts for a temporary increase in nutrition assistance with more resources for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamps), and expanding eligibility for unemployed workers and legal immigrants. Our experience at the local level convinces us that additional funding is also needed for The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP); the Special Supplemental Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC); and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), all of which provide critical assistance for families in need, the unemployed, the disabled, and the elderly.

- We also **strongly oppose** a provision in the bill that would require the use of the E-verify employer verification system 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. As a recent Congressional Budget Office report detailed, the *E-verify* program would add to the costs borne by small businesses, state and local governments, schools, hospitals, and non-profit organizations mandated to enroll in the system. The Social Security Administration database upon which the *E-verify* system relies has unacceptably high error rates and could lead to the wrongful dismissals of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents. We urge you to remove this provision from the bill and defer its consideration to a more appropriate vehicle, such as legislation that reforms the nation's immigration laws.

- We **support** efforts to protect low-income families from losing Medicaid and social service assistance. Temporarily increasing Federal Medicaid matching payments (FMAP) and providing grants to state and local governments for social service programs (SSBG) will help ensure that the safety net remains strong.

- We **support** increased funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) to help poor families cope with costly heating oil and gas bills.

- We **support** extending Unemployment Insurance benefits (UI) to people in states with disproportionately high unemployment rates. Changes should be made to existing, arbitrary, and unnecessary rules which result in nearly 60 percent of laid-off workers being excluded from UI benefits.
- We **support** funding increases to HUD's Emergency Shelter Grant program that helps families avoid eviction or obtain new housing. A million more families with children could fall into deep poverty as a result of this economic crisis, putting them at a particularly high risk of homelessness.
- We **support** capitalizing the new Housing Trust Fund, which will employ workers in the construction or rehabilitation of homes for families facing dire situations. This will assist families through what may be a lengthy recession. Likewise, additional funding for additional housing vouchers would offer access to stable, affordable housing for vulnerable families.
- We **support** efforts to create jobs for unemployed and underemployed people in private, non-profit, and public sectors that advance important national priorities, reflect good stewardship of resources, and meet urgent and emerging needs (e.g. alternative energy, environment, and infrastructure).

We urge Congress to act quickly and wisely with a constant attention to addressing the human impact and moral dimensions of this recession. As Pope Benedict XVI in his recent address to members of the diplomatic corps reminds us, "Bolstering the economy demands rebuilding confidence. This goal will only be reached by implementing an ethics based on the innate dignity of the human person." This is no time to seek economic or partisan advantage. This is a time to pursue the common good, beginning with help for the families and communities most hurt by this crisis.

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

Sincerely,

Most Rev. William F. Murphy  
Bishop of Rockville Centre  
Chairman  
Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development  
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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