

Testimony on the Biennial Budget

Chairman Widener, Vice Chairman Jones, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to share with you concerns about the potential impact of budgetary decision you are about to make. I've also suggestions for reducing the likely devastation resulting from particular program cuts on Ohioans living on the economic edge.

I am Bob Erickson and I am here representing the Hunger Network in Ohio. I serve as director of this faith-based, not-for-profit, advocacy organization dedicated to ending hunger in the State. Most of our 2500 partner congregations provide--beyond the traditional church services--community ministries such material assistance, financial aid, and mentoring families in need.

We recognize the value of emergency responses to nutritional needs--such food pantries, soup kitchens, etc. Yet we are especially committed to enabling these struggling families to progress from dependence to independence. Beyond direct services, we seek to change conditions that lead to desperation. This often requires incremental steps, beginning with immediate hunger relief and including interim reliance upon food stamp and school breakfast/lunch/community meals programs. Long-term, we support developmental approaches to economic rehabilitation of those who are emotionally drained and financially stuck. These include far-sighted case work, job training and helping to locate employment, housing stability, transitional medical services and child care, etc. We acknowledge that while "charity" (giving people what they need at the moment) is often necessary, "justice" (countering any imbalanced social structure indifferent to the dominance of the "haves" over the "have-nots") is essential. Thus, we approach the fundamental problem of severe poverty as matter of human compassion channeled toward economic fairness, human dignity, and, ultimately, self-sufficiency.

In this regard, we are here to offer a variety of recommendations to reduce the burden on persons sometimes called "the least." In agreement but without repeating the testimonies of companion organizations advocating for improvements in human service accessibility, here are our primary recommendations:

1. **Elevate financial support for the Ohio Association of Second Harvest Foodbanks to \$34 million.** With only so many boxes of cereal and jars of peanut butter caring people can tote to church, Second Harvest supplies a larger percentage of inventories for many of our food pantries and soup kitchens.
2. **Maintain Benefit Banks throughout the State.** Training and deploying volunteers to be resourceful beyond immediate and transitory support is extremely valuable and cost effective.
3. **Supplement line staff in county Jobs and Family Services** to respond to a growing population of needy Ohioans, equipped to make available, not just handouts, but long term handup help designed to move them toward greater self-reliance.
4. **Implement "STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EXPANDING OPPORTUNITY AND REDUCING POVERTY IN OHIO."** Produced two years ago by the Ohio Antipoverty Task Force (OAPTF), this Report recommends 23 shorter term recommendations followed in the second phase by in the series of longer term efforts to reduce poverty. Much, if not all, of it still applies and remains viable. Attention to the OAPTF Report could effectively illumine legislative hearings on the 2012-13 biennial budget and, therefore, warrants legislative reexamination.

Impossible to condense the worth of the overall 65 page Report into a few paragraph, we certainly recommend reading its entirety while highlighting here a few recommendations that speak to budget considerations.

- a. Create Opportunities for Economic Advancement. Encourage, enable, and support sustainable movement up the economic ladder for Ohioans living in poverty, as well as those who are at risk of falling into poverty, through training and employment opportunities.
- b. Establish Foundational Stability. Provide for the basic needs of Ohioans living in poverty, as well as those who are at risk of falling into poverty, in order to prevent additional hardships, stabilize their current economic situation, and prepare them to take advantage of opportunities that lead to economic advancement.
- c. Invest in Children and Young Adults. Further invest in children and young adults in an effort to reverse the tide of generational poverty.
- d. Ensure Transparency, Accountability, and Leadership within governmental programs. Ensure progress is accountable, investments are uniformly measured, information is made public, and ongoing interagency leadership is effective.

With each containing highly detailed strategies and recommendations, attention here will be limited to a few pivotal possibilities:

Defining “Poverty”

Central to its initial purpose and ultimate usefulness is the recommendation to develop a more accurate measure of poverty. Currently Ohio relies on an obsolete index that is grossly inaccurate and drastically under-estimated. Before proceeding further on miscalculations and treating the problem of poverty with skewed fantasies, public officials are called upon to adopt a better system for measuring poverty.

Reducing Waste

Among the more immediately implementable and practical suggestions, more cooperation and greater efficiencies requires interagency leadership. That list includes bureaucratic inefficiencies, duplication of effort on one hand and failure to synchronize services on the other, unnecessarily complicated forms and procedures.

Implementing an Ohio Earned Income Tax Credit

The State would do well to create a refundable state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) based on 5% of the currently viable federal version. State EITCs bring additional money into the community and have increased the number of people filing for and receiving the federal EITC..

5. Treat the budget as a moral document. A recently formed coalition of representatives of various Christian, Jewish, and Islamic communities have come together to develop a “voice of principle.” Collected around common values and priorities, they honed four simple but profoundly important principles for scrutinizing this budget:

a. SERVE THE COMMON GOOD

A primary goal of government—as our founders affirmed—is to work for the “common good.” Provision of essential human services is more efficient and effective than crisis management. *It means that the common good for all of Ohio's citizens will be our first thought and commitment, and what is good for me or my political party... will become a secondary thought. It means that the budget becomes a proactive tool.. to unite and empower us to protect basic and essential human services and dignity for every (Ohioan).*

b. DO NO HARM

Basic human compassion underlies this bedrock ethical mandate. Every policy will be weighed and each fiscal decision measured by the principle of not harming the people of Ohio. *It means that the General Assembly and each citizen of this state will be on guard so that every proposal, every action, every decision and even our silence will not add injury to another of God's children or to any part of God's creation.*

c. SHARE SACRIFICES

The current budget situation requires significant sacrifices. As Ohioans, we commit to share the necessary sacrifices equitably and unselfishly, so that all Ohioans do their part to ensure that the most vulnerable are protected.

Eliminating waste and duplication in government spending and raising new revenues and plugging tax loopholes for the wealthy must be given equal, thoughtful and respectful consideration. It means addressing the prevailing attitude in our society that taxes are evil, destructive and limiting rather than a constructive tool to ensure the common good and our freedoms.

d. SHOW CIVILITY

Civility contributes to teamwork and helpful dialogue. Therefore in all budget discourse we will use words that respect and build up the people of Ohio. *It means we begin by affirming that all people - rich or poor, Democrat or Republican, life-long resident or recent immigrant, business owner or employee, public or private sector worker can and must contribute to the budget discourse. It means, at the end of the day after difficult decisions have been made, all the people of Ohio will have been treated respectfully.*

Finally, our overall appeal is to recognize the urgency of this moment for greater understanding of the vulnerabilities of an enormous number of Ohioans. How do we prevent more precarious families from slipping further into poverty and becoming increasingly immobilized in its grip, ultimately unable to get by without greater and more expensive rescue. As the commercial calling for upfront vehicle maintenance suggests “you can deal with it now” or “you can wait later until the problem worsens and remedies become more challenging.” Whether from humanitarian or economic considerations, these needs will not be diminished by indifference and postponement.

Thank you for your time and attention.