

AEC Fall Meeting
Public Policy Commission Report
Billie K. Fidlin, Chair

State Legislature

We are concerned about the upcoming Legislature --- there are probably plans to do more tax cuts or do something about TABOR or a flat tax which will seriously impact poor and low income people by actually raising their taxes while rich people will actually pay less taxes. Flat tax implementation would also do away deductions for contributions to charities, including churches. Rumors continue around further budget cuts --- because of the impending loss of \$1 billion dollar of taxes lost with stopping of the Governor's 1cent sales tax. There will also be talk of CPS reform --- again given all the child deaths and surrounding publicity. October 5th PAFCO is holding a conference and will share a yearlong plan to help nonprofits to be engaged legally and effectively in empowering people being served to voter participation. Many agencies have lost up to 20% of staff and funding. Catholic Charities agencies have lost significant child welfare funding over the last three years.

Hunger

Demand for emergency food continues to escalate in AZ. St. Mary's Food Bank Alliance and Yuma Community Food Bank both report emergency food distribution doubled since this time last year. The other three food banks in the AAFB network report in the 70-80% increase level. This is driven primarily by high unemployment and the 2011-12 state cuts to other benefits. Temporary Assistance to Needy Families was cut to 24 months in a lifetime this past June, and AHCCCS cuts to many populations that now cannot receive healthcare coverage at all, or the full coverage they had received in the past, have put tremendous strain on low-income households.

Federal commodities (The Emergency Food Assistance Program-TEFAP) which forms the core of food making up emergency food boxes have been cut by 40% for this coming federal fiscal year (beginning this October). This cut is of great concern. Food banks are working to make up the difference by building even stronger relationships in communities they serve to develop contributions of food and funds. **The faith-based community is especially going to be important to make sure those who currently do give regularly, continue with their generosity, and those who have not yet made this commitment, consider it and engage.**

The Budget Deficit Committee formed in Congress (which includes Senator Jon Kyl of AZ) is potentially considering measures to further cut funding for nutrition assistance programs, while at the same time capping the deduction for charitable deductions. These changes would be particularly devastating to people qualified for programs such as SNAP (formerly Food Stamps) and the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (seniors, post-partum women and children). These are identified as most frequently mentioned to be cut at this point in time. Plus capping the charitable deduction would serve as a "double hit" since it would reduce contributions to food banks at a time when more persons need food bank services.

Hunger Action Month runs through September and specifically, Hunger Action Week will be Sept. 12 -18 in Phoenix and is focused on building awareness in the faith-based community. If you would like more information about this we have info at AAFB by contacting Brian Simpson at [602-528-3434](tel:602-528-3434).

As joblessness continues to rise so does hunger and poverty in our state. The faith communities are more important than ever in the struggle for the daily survival of many of our state's people. We know that our congregations are operating on slim to none and continue to give to the needy through food boxes, help with rent and utilities and much more.

What we need from our faith communities is a STRONG voice to our State Legislature and our Congress on NOT cutting the most vital of programs to our friends and neighbors. This costs nothing in dollars, but means everything to the bottom line - caring for our people! Cuts to food stamps, temporary assistance to needy families, AHCCCS, WIC for Women, Infants and Children, will all mean that each one of our churches will have to stretch even further to help. We know you can't continue this way - it is a strong partnership of faiths, government and community that will help our people through this very difficult crisis. WHEAT and other agencies involved in AEC are here to help your congregations become strong advocates - we're here to help you help others!

Immigration

There was good news from the Obama Administration on August 18th that the Dept. of Homeland Security was adopting a new review process which would call for review of all cases pending before immigration courts to determine which are "low priority" cases and may be administratively closed and which are "high priority" cases and should be prosecuted more aggressively. In the future, these determinations will be made before individuals are placed in removal proceedings, so that it will be possible that "low priority" cases may not be referred to the immigration court.

This preliminary announcement has been encouraging to immigrants with no criminal records whose presence in the U.S. without documents is the sole basis for immigration court action. Guidance will be given to USCIS and ICE agents and officers to help them make better, more consistent decisions about whom to place in removal proceedings. Arguably, most Dream-Act-eligible young persons would be those considered to be "low priority," for example, and those with criminal records would be the "high priority" cases.

However, immigrant advocates are hastening to inform people that this is not an amnesty and that nothing has been implemented yet. What has not yet been decided: exactly what cases will be considered low priority or how to have a particular case considered.

Death Penalty

Inge Casey represents the Coalition of Arizonans to Abolish the Death Penalty on the Commission, and its Phoenix chapter, the Arizona Death Penalty Forum. We are committed to work for to educate the public about the facts of the death penalty and to abolition this drastic punishment because it is immoral and is unjustly administered." Commission members have taken part in prayer vigils at the State Capital prior to recent executions.

The ASK

We respectfully request our bishops and judicatory leaders to be a present and consistent voice that the legislature cannot ignore. This requires more than written commentary. We need our leadership to **call elected officials, request to speak at legislative sessions, hearings, and be present in all media formats sharing your concern for the vulnerable.** Also, to **gather your respective constituencies and rebirth their responsibility to be the moral voice of faith** in difficult times, to **engage in holy conferencing around the issues,** and to **encourage participation in the election process.**

