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Oregon religious leaders issue moral challenge to state Legislature “Reverse Course” on cuts to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and fully fund other programs that reduce childhood hunger and homelessness.

In the midst of persistent high unemployment and increasing family homelessness in Oregon, over 30 prominent Oregon religious leaders today issued a moral challenge to the state Legislature to “reverse course” on proposed cuts to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, and to fully fund the Emergency Housing Account, the General Fund Food program and other key programs that reduce hunger and homelessness for poor families with children.

In a letter delivered to all members of the Legislature and posted online, a broad coalition of Oregon religious leaders from several faith traditions joined together to condemn proposed cuts to the TANF program and to call for additional action to reduce childhood hunger and homelessness in Oregon.

A link to the letter can be found on the home page of the EMO website at www.emoregon.org.

Among the more than 30 religious leaders signing the letter were bishops and denominational executives from several Christian denominations, several Rabbis, Imams and other Muslim leaders, and a number of Unitarians. The letter was also signed by the executive directors of several faith-based non-profit agencies from diverse religious traditions. The release of the letter today marks the beginning of a broader statewide signature gathering effort.

The letter singled out for particularly strong criticism a proposal to reduce the lifetime TANF enrollment limit from sixty months to 18-months:

“We most strongly urge you to restore the \$11.6 million in funding needed to maintain the current 60-month enrollment cap. Of the cuts proposed to TANF, the 18-month enrollment cap is the only one that will result in otherwise eligible families losing their monthly stipend during the next biennium. Consequently, an 18-month time limit will almost certainly lead to additional families becoming homeless and will likely generate new foster-care placements as well.”

The 18-month time limit and other cuts being considered to TANF were first officially proposed in the Governor's Recommended Budget for 2013.

In an additional statement, David Leslie, executive director of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, said that in proposing cuts to TANF, the Legislature's timing could not be worse. "We still have near record levels of unemployment, and the number of homeless children in Oregon public schools has increased 134 percent over the last seven years," said Leslie. "Now the governor has proposed a plan to cut desperately poor families with children off the only program in the state that provides them with a small cash stipend to help with basic expenses. This shocks the conscience and has moved many in the faith community to action."

The interfaith letter, using DHS data released earlier this month, notes that TANF serves over 54,000 Oregon children in approximately 30,000 families. The full set of cuts that have been included in budget proposals so far total \$67.9 million and affect a number of different components of the TANF program, which provides cash assistance, case management, and a range of job training and education components to help move families from deep poverty to self-sufficiency.

Recent public hearings on the proposed cuts held at the state capitol were packed with opponents of the cuts, who not only filled the hearing room but several additional overflow rooms as well. A number of TANF recipients were among those who testified to the importance of the program.

TANF serves fewer families today than it did when the program began 15 years ago. In addition, families now have to be much poorer to qualify, and the cash benefits have declined in value due to inflation. In fact, families have to be in deep poverty to qualify. As noted in a recent report issued by the Oregon Center for Public Policy:

"To be considered for the program, a family of three can earn no more than \$616 per month in gross income, an amount equal to 40 percent of the 2011 federal poverty level for a family of that size. A woman working 17 hours per week at minimum wage earns too much to even apply for TANF assistance for herself and her two children."¹

Additional Information about the TANF program can be found on the website of the Oregon Hunger Task Force at: <http://oregonhunger.org/TANF-Oregon> and on the website of the Oregon Department of Human Services.

¹ The April 4, 2011 report titled "Oregon Can Do Better than Harm Poor Kids," is available online at www.ocpp.org. The quote appears on page 2 of the full report, written by OCPP staff members By Janet Bauer, Jason Gettel and Juan Carlos Ordóñez.