

TO: Health & Human Services Committee
FROM: Tom Venzor, Executive Director
Nebraska Catholic Conference
DATE: February 15, 2023
RE: LB661 (Food Assistance Innovation Grants) (Support)

The Nebraska Catholic Conference advocates for the public policy interests of the Catholic Church and advances the Gospel of Life through engaging, educating, and empowering public officials, Catholic laity, and the general public.

We want to thank Senator Ibach for bringing this important bill to help address food insecurity.

The Catholic Church in Nebraska runs two major social service agencies: Catholic Charities of Omaha which serves in the Archdiocese of Omaha (covering Omaha and 23 counties throughout northeast Nebraska) and Catholic Social Services of Southern Nebraska which serves in the Diocese of Lincoln (covering all of Nebraska south of the Platte River). This is in addition, of course, to the countless charitable works that are done at the parish, school, and family level.

Between our two agencies, they provide services such as emergency cash assistance, immigration legal services, refugee resettlement and employment services, mental and behavioral health services, microbusiness and asset development services, family strengthening services, and transitional housing and support for women and children fleeing domestic violence, human trafficking, or are experiencing a crisis pregnancy. For each agency their largest charitable work is emergency and supportive food services.

To provide some context for Catholic Charities, in 2019 their food program served 55,000 people; in 2020, they served 134,000 people; in 2021, they served 222,000 people; and in 2022, they served over 289,000 people with 2.1 million pounds of food. In just three short years, the number of people being served has grown by nearly 400%.

As for Catholic Social Services, in the fiscal year 2021-22, CSS provided 306 tons of food throughout their Lincoln, Auburn, Hastings, and Imperial offices. Specifically, the Hastings office runs 5 different food routes each week throughout southcentral and southwestern Nebraska communities ensuring food access to rural Nebraskans. The Hastings office alone distributed over 200 tons of food during that fiscal year.

LB661 would be an important legislative strategy for helping with “regional and local capacity and food security” for Nebraskans across the state which Catholic Charities and Catholic Social Services strive to daily undertake in their charitable outreach.

When we review legislation like LB661, two principles from Catholic social teaching guide our analysis and help us see the need for the state to step up and further assist in this particular area.

The first principle is “preferential option for the poor”. Preferential option for the poor is “a *special form* of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity[.] It affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies equally to our *social responsibilities*[.]... [T]his love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry[.]”¹

The second is the principle of subsidiarity. This principle, in part, restrains unjustified and excessive intervention by the state into society, to prevent encroaching on and crowding out the work of “intermediate” communities such as churches, volunteer groups, non-profits, and private companies that advance the common good in their own unique and original ways. Subsidiarity also recognizes that sometimes local and intermediate institutions cannot fulfill some important need of the larger community by their own efforts or are simply not the appropriate authority to do so. In these situations, subsidiarity counsels that it is appropriate and necessary for the state to assume proportionate responsibility for the matter at hand.

LB661 is a bill which recognizes a “preferential option for the poor” who have difficulty accessing sufficient and nutritious food. It also strikes the right balance that subsidiarity demands. LB661 recognizes the hard work being undertaken by charitable service agencies in the area of food insecurity and, without excessively intervening in their work, LB661 provides additional needed resources to further carry out the work that remains to be done to ensure Nebraskans have access to food.

For these reasons, we request that the Committee advance LB661 to General File.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, paragraph 42 (1988), accessible at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html (last accessed February 2, 2023).