



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

January 29, 2015

Dear Governor Walker:

As faith leaders representing more than 460,000 members throughout the State of Wisconsin, we wish to congratulate you on the start of this new legislative session, and share with you our prayers for wisdom and strength to face it all with compassion, collegiality and peace.

The congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) are committed to ending hunger and addressing the root causes of poverty in our Wisconsin communities. Our consciences demand that we earnestly defend the rights and the dignity of the weakest and poorest among us.

The Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin (LOPPW) serves as the public voice of the ELCA, and represents its convictions and values in the state legislative process.

LOPPW and its network of advocates concentrate on legislation that transforms the lives of those living in poverty. In particular we are currently focusing on children and youth in poverty. In this letter we specifically request your consideration and support of the following two LOPPW priorities for this legislative session:

1. **Safe Harbor Legislation** to clarify that trafficked youth under 18 caught in prostitution be treated as victims rather than criminals and that funding be provided for needed services to help survivors of sex trafficking to find a safe harbor and move on with their lives.
2. **Prison reform for 17 year-old offenders of non-violent crimes** to allow youth who are 17 years old and charged with a nonviolent crime be tried as juveniles rather than adults.

Several states have passed **Safe Harbor** legislation. In Minnesota youth who would have been before charged with prostitution are now provided needed services to rehabilitate and move on with their lives. Please note that the percentage of youth reporting pimps and traffickers to the police has increased since the Safe Harbor Law was passed in Minnesota.

Several states, including Illinois, have changed to **trying 17 year-old offenders of nonviolent crimes in the juvenile justice system**. According to Pamela Rodriguez, president of the Center for Health and Justice at TASC, the Illinois bill “treats young people as evidence suggests we should, offering a rehabilitative approach consistent with national trends that reflect a growing understanding of youth development.” She also added, “Handling youth who have offended in juvenile court will shrink the risk that 17-year-olds, charged with a felony, will become entrenched in the criminal justice and correctional systems and boost the chance that they will emerge as assets to their community.”

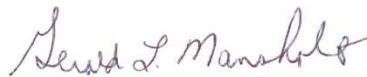
We recognize the decisions and demands placed on you as our elected leaders are complicated and may impact the people of this state for years to come. At the same time, we sincerely believe it is important the decisions made by our government not place undue challenges on those who can least afford to bear those burdens. We ask that you be mindful of their needs in your consideration of policies and programs that serve the most vulnerable.

Each week our ELCA congregations pray that God grants you and your staff the strength, wisdom, and compassion to serve the people of Wisconsin. We give thanks for the commitment you have made to our state government, and we hope your negotiations and debates this session be guided by care and respect for the lives of all people.

With respect,



Bishop Thomas Skrenes
Northern Great Lakes Synod



Gerald Mansholt
East Central Synod of Wisconsin



Bishop Rick Hoyme
Northwest Synod of Wisconsin



Bishop Mary Froiland
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