

ARIZONA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE BISHOPS STATEMENT ON LEGISLATION IMPACTING VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

As Bishops of the Arizona Catholic Conference, our thoughts and prayers are with all of our elected state representatives as they face very difficult decisions on a number of important issues.

Among these issues is our state's budget deficit. Unfortunately, Arizona continues to have one of the worst deficits in the country when compared to the size of its base budget. We realize that there are no easy solutions to fixing either our economy or the budget, but we continue to ask that our representatives always keep in mind the most vulnerable among us - the unborn, children, the elderly, and all who are struggling just to make ends meet.

We are grateful for legislative support of measures to protect unborn children, to promote the protection of marriage as a foundational institution in our society, and to expand educational opportunities for all children through school choice. At the same time, however, we are concerned with high profile measures relating to immigration that we believe could be detrimental to public safety and that could divide families.

In particular, it is our understanding that SB 1070 and HB 2632 are identical bills aimed at requiring greater enforcement of immigration laws by local police. In addition to the concerns expressed by local police agencies throughout Arizona, we are concerned that the present language of these bills does not clearly state that undocumented persons who become victims of crime can come forward without fear of deportation.

After all, it is in all of our best interests that all people in our state - regardless of their citizenship status - should not be afraid to report crimes. Anything that may deter crimes from being reported or prosecuted will only keep dangerous criminals on the streets, making our communities less safe.

Another aspect of these bills that concerns us is that Arizona would become the first state in the nation to codify its own "illegal immigration" law by requiring persons who are here unlawfully in terms of federal law to be charged with trespassing under Arizona law. The charge for the first offense would be a high misdemeanor; for the second offense a felony.

We understand that supporters of these bills claim that the intent of this "trespassing" law is to allow local police to hold undocumented immigrants who are suspects in crimes. However, the bill itself does not limit enforcement to persons suspected of criminal activity, thus leaving the possibility of criminalizing the presence of even children and young persons brought into our country by their parents. If enacted, these bills could lead to separation of family members that would not take place under current federal law.

We believe it would be far better to withdraw these bills than to risk costly and unfairly punitive enforcement.

The problems with our immigration system are complex, and it is our prayer and hope that Congress will ultimately address this broken system with comprehensive immigration reform. In the meantime, we are concerned that local legislation not create new problems for families or have a negative impact on public safety.

We are grateful for the public service that all of our elected officials give to better our state, and we pray that their decisions are guided by wisdom and a concern for the most vulnerable among us.

Most Rev. James S. Wall
Bishop of Gallup

Olmsted

Most Rev. Thomas J.
Bishop of Phoenix

Most Rev. Gerald F. Kicanas
Bishop of Tucson