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Church Activists: State Must Avert Crisis in Human Services

*Lutheran Day participants seek bigger state investment
in programs serving the elderly, disabled and poor*

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SPRINGFIELD, Illinois – Lutheran activists from across Illinois gathered at the State Capitol today to ask lawmakers for bigger investments in a broad range of state human services programs in the coming year’s budget, to alleviate funding erosions caused by the increased cost of delivering services since 2000.

Lutheran church members are calling on lawmakers to preserve programs that serve the elderly, disabled and poor, including home care programs for seniors and foster care programs for abused and neglected children. Most local social service agencies that deliver state-mandated human services programs haven’t seen a significant increase in their reimbursement rate from the state in seven years, while their cost of doing business has increased an average of 23%, according to federal estimates. Higher electric rates and rising health insurance premiums for their employees are just some of the factors that have contributed to the escalating cost of doing business for local providers.

“The Lutheran tradition and the State Constitution share a commitment to ensuring that the three pillars that support the common good – health care, education, and human services – remain strong,” said Bishop Warren Freiheit, whose Central/Southern Illinois Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) encompasses the 76 counties of downstate Illinois, including some of the state’s poorest.

“While education and health care have gotten much of the public attention they deserve recently, we wanted to ensure that the human service programs that protect our state’s most vulnerable citizens are not forgotten,” Freiheit added.

In response to the growing erosion of human services funding, Lutherans organized a prayer service in the State Capitol to ask for wisdom and strength for individual lawmakers and action on behalf of those in need, and to remind all of the responsibility that people of faith bear to serve the needs of the poor as part of their calling as children of God.

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“The Gospel of Matthew couldn’t be more clear,” said prayer service presider Bishop Paul Landahl of ELCA’s Metropolitan Chicago Synod:

Matthew 25:34-36 [Jesus said] Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’

In addition to the prayer service, Lutheran Church members met with lawmakers throughout the day, asking state leaders to provide an across-the-board boost in reimbursement rates for community-based social service programs in the coming year’s state budget. The estimated cost of a 3% increase in such programs is \$200 million. In addition, Lutheran Day participants are advocating for fiscal policies to peg future reimbursement rate adjustments to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Employment Cost Index (ECI).

“There’s no denying that the rising cost of delivering human services is a very serious problem,” said State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, chair of the House Human Services Committee. “Every year, lawmakers on both sides of the aisle struggle with how to meet the existing needs of our state’s most vulnerable citizens, as well as tackle new problems. Every year, there’s not enough money to meet the needs, and someone gets left behind.”

Added Feigenholtz, “I’m cautiously optimistic that we will address the structural budget deficit our state faces this year, and rise to our Constitutional obligation to provide human services to our state’s most vulnerable citizens, as well as secure affordable access to health care and a sound public education system. Only continued grassroots advocacy like Lutheran Day can make that happen.”

Lutheran Day organizers say they do plan to continue to advocate for a greater investment in human services throughout the budget process, by relying on congregation members to reach out to lawmakers, as well as friends and co-workers, to help them understand the challenges facing human services providers. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod ([LCMS](#)) have a combined membership in Illinois of approximately 500,000 members in 539 ELCA congregations and 489 LCMS congregations across Illinois.

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About the Lutheran Church

The Lutheran Church has a long history of supporting programs that protect society’s most vulnerable members and public advocacy, rooted deeply within the Bible itself as well as early Lutheran Church teachings. Less than ten years after Martin Luther launched the Protestant Reformation in 1571, the Lutheran Church published its central doctrines in the [Book of Concord](#). Among those central doctrines, Lutherans believe that while salvation comes only through the grace of God, and not through good works alone, Lutherans are called upon to do good in the world in response to God’s love. The [Book of Concord](#) also teaches Lutherans to be actively engaged in civil life, ensuring that the laws of the land create good works, just like the acts of individuals.