

New Mexico Conference of Catholic Bishops



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Most Rev. John C. Wester's Statement on Gov. Susanna Martinez's "PullTogether" Campaign to Address New Mexico's Children Poverty Issues

Pope Francis' Prayer to the Holy Family:

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate the splendor of true love; to you we turn with trust.

Holy Family of Nazareth, grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer, authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic churches.

Holy Family of Nazareth may families never again experience violence, rejection and division: may all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort and healing.

Holy Family of Nazareth, Make us once more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family, and its beauty in God's plan.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, graciously hear our prayer. Amen.

We are happy the conversation about children's well-being is happening. This is a very positive step. We are encouraged – and I am grateful -- that Governor Martinez is now talking about the social conditions of our children. The need is so great: → we rank #1 in children living in poverty in the United States. These numbers are astonishing! That's not a "first place" we want in our state!

We agree with the government's call to pull together. This is truly an important step. It is important to remember, however, that when we pull together, we need to pull resources together. For example, programs for children need to be **funded**. The "PullTogether" campaign underestimates the lack of access to the internet for the people in poverty. An online directory is not a silver bullet. These problems need a large-scale effort to create systemic change. These decades' old problems, which have recently boiled to a heating point of tragedy, can no longer be ignored. A resource directory is

wonderful, **if** it is directing people to fully-funded programs, which has not been the case in New Mexico.

I would note that in this Year of Mercy, Pope Francis has called us all to take an inventory of the needs of the poor and the evidence is clear that the state has not funded the unmet needs of our poor. When Pope Francis visited Ciudad Juarez, we all heard his message of building bridges. He was right but these bridges must be built on foundations of truth or they will crumble. Accepting the truth of the needs of our children in New Mexico is the first building block. Now, for us to extend the arches of that bridge, sacrifices need to be made. New Mexico, as a society, has an obligation to pay just taxes that fund essential programs. At the same time, we must look at other resources, private and public. For example, CHI St. Joseph's Children operates the State's largest home visiting program, all with private funds. There is a moral and ethical responsibility for the state to use the resources of the Land Grant Permanent School Fund, in what could be called a just distribution formula. We should no longer exclude our youngest members of society from the benefit of the fund. As we are all called to pull together, we should allow all citizens to publically debate this issue and have the opportunity to vote on a constitutional amendment to fund **early childhood development** from the Land Grant Permanent School Fund. We should not fear debate, but rather, bring the debate into a dialogue of sincere efforts that are the cornerstones to bridge building. If we are all called to pull together, we are all called to exercise our responsibility to put children first.

With each new report and statistic, we see clearly that our children are suffering from poor early childhood care. Now is the time to pull together and make our children our priority. The state has a constitutional mandate to address the social needs of its people. We should all be propelled into action. And at the top of the list of that action is substantial and sustainable funding of early childhood programs. For example, as reported by the *Albuquerque Journal* on April 22nd, there is a waiting list of 750 for child care assistance but they have been instructed to reapply by the deadline of May 31st. This is not a realistic deadline in our view, especially when you consider all the obstacles our poor face in going through the bureaucracy of government. It is fine that we reach out to find people in need, but not to refer them to programs that have waiting lists. We need to fund those programs to eliminate the waiting lists.

Today, I pledge to join an effort of pulling together for the well-being of our children and because of my commitment, I am obliged to ring the bell of human dignity hoping that it sounds in the community as an alarm and a signal of distress for all the families in New Mexico needing all of our assistance to achieve the promise of health and happiness. I question our state's intentions when its children are ranked with the worst outcome indicators and at the same time sits on the second largest permanent fund in the nation. The scale must tip in favor of the children.

I pray that we are able to do more than sing a jingle but truly commit the funds that it will take to pull our children in New Mexico out of the disparity they find themselves in. Let's not be fooled: these are not average problems. Rather, the health and well-being of hundreds of thousands of persons are being threatened. We have the means at our disposal to make a positive difference in the lives of our children. Let's pull together and do just that! --END