



CIRCLE *of* PROTECTION

November 7, 2023

Dear President Biden and Members of Congress,

We are writing as the Circle of Protection, a diverse advocacy coalition of churches and ministries focused on people in need. Jesus identified with people in need—people who are hungry or thirsty, strangers, people who can't afford proper clothes, and prisoners (Matthew 25). This letter is about poverty-important decisions that Congress and the President will be considering in FY2024 appropriations, the Farm Bill, and possible tax legislation.

Churches and charities across the country are struggling with a surge in hunger and poverty. According to the Census Bureau's best measure, poverty in America increased more between 2021 and 2022 than ever before. The decision to let pandemic assistance programs expire, despite their proven effectiveness, resulted in roughly 15 million more people in poverty in 2022 even though the percentage of Americans who had jobs had increased. The impact was especially severe among African-Americans and Latinos. Real-time estimates from Columbia University indicate that poverty remains high in 2023. Poverty is doing tremendous damage to our communities and to individuals, especially children.

As people who are shaped by the God of the Bible, we urge you to give priority to poverty-focused programs as you negotiate FY2024 appropriations and other legislation during the last few months of this year.

In particular, we want to highlight the need for increased funding to make WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children) available to all the mothers with little children who apply. Congress has done this on a bipartisan basis for more than 25 years. But even if Congress funds WIC at the level of the President's original request, an estimated 600,000 eligible mothers and toddlers will likely be turned away, and another 4.7 million will have their benefits reduced given higher-than-anticipated participation growth and food costs.

We are also especially concerned about funding for international aid, notably emergency aid. The number of the world's people suffering acute food insecurity at crisis or worse levels surged from 193 million in 2021 to 258 million in 2022. Wars in Ukraine, some of the world's poorest countries, and now Israel-Gaza have sharply increased the need for humanitarian aid. We are also concerned that the President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) requires reauthorization to continue its life-saving work.

We pray that Congress can **avoid a government shutdown**. It would cause hardship for many Americans, and low-income people are especially vulnerable to economic shocks. We are glad to see the Senate moving forward to approve appropriations bills that are generally in line with the bipartisan debt-ceiling agreement.

Congress also has important work to do beyond the FY2024 appropriations issues. The authorization of the **Farm Bill** needs to be extended. Two titles of the Farm Bill, **SNAP and international food aid**, are especially important to hungry people.

Finally, there's a compelling moral case for some re-expansion of the Child Tax Credit for low-income families. The 2021 expansion of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) played a large role in reducing child poverty in America to its lowest level ever. Evaluative studies confirmed that parents kept their jobs and used the additional support for family needs. The Child Tax Credit, like WIC, has been developed and extended by both parties. Currently, 19 million low-income children do not receive the maximum \$2,000 credit per child, while millions of families with higher incomes benefit from it. Congress should expand the CTC this year by improving the credit for low-income children.

When parents wanted Jesus to bless their children, his disciples turned them away. Jesus was busy, and they thought he didn't have time to spend with children. But Jesus "took the children up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them" (Mark 10:13-16). Despite all the pressures on you now, the churches and ministries in the Circle of Protection are asking you to give priority to people struggling with hunger and poverty, especially children.

Sincerely,

Rev. Dr. Paul Baxley, Executive Coordinator, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

Rev. Dr. David Beckmann, Dean's Advisor for Political and Economic Justice, Virginia Theological Seminary; Coordinator, Circle of Protection

John A. Berry, President, The U.S. Society of St. Vincent de Paul

John Carr, Founder, Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, Georgetown University

Rev. Eugene Cho, President and CEO, Bread for the World

The Most Rev. Michael B. Curry, Presiding Bishop and Primate, The Episcopal Church

Rev. Dr. Thomas De Vries, President and CEO, Citygate Network

The Most Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Rev. Christopher J. Kellerman, SJ, Secretary of Justice and Ecology, Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States

Rev. Walter Kim, President, National Association of Evangelicals

Rev. Carlos Malavé, President, Latino Christian National Network

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Bridget Moix, General Secretary, Friends Committee on National Legislation

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Kerry Alys Robinson, President and CEO, Catholic Charities USA

Rev. Dr. Gabriel Salguero, President and Founder, National Latino Evangelical Coalition

Rev. Lori Tapia, National Pastor for Hispanic Ministries, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S. and Canada

Rev. Adam Russell Taylor, President, Sojourners

Rev. Jim Wallis, Inaugural Chair and Founding Director, Center on Faith and Justice at Georgetown University

Dr. Barbara Williams-Skinner, Co-Convener, National African American Clergy Network; President, Skinner Leadership Institute