

Opinion

Protecting the safety net for Massachusetts families

Lisa Alberghini Judy Beckler Tiziana Dearing

Posted: 10/24/2008

The problem with Ballot Question One to repeal the Massachusetts state income tax is that in these troubling economic times when each of us is experiencing the serious effects of crisis in the financial markets, a slowing economy and rapidly increasing food prices, it might just feel good to check that box.

The truth is, though, that while checking the box may feel like a reasonable form of protest against our current economic hardship, eliminating the state income tax would wipe out \$12 billion of the Commonwealth's roughly \$28 billion budget, depriving many people of the most basic human needs and decimating the safety net for thousands of families at a time when they need it most.

As lay leaders of three social justice organizations affiliated with the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston serving over 200,000 people annually and providing permanent affordable homes to more than 10,000 individuals, we see the dramatic and devastating effects of budget cuts every day on the people we serve. Addressing the basic needs of the poor is already a daunting challenge. It will become impossible if Question One passes. From 2000 to 2005 there was a 26% increase in the number of people living at half the poverty level, and the percentage of our population considered severely poor has reached a 32-year high. Add to that a double-digit increase in family homelessness over the past three years in Boston alone, and a cost of living that is among the highest in the nation, and you have a dire situation for many in need. With only a 0.3% increase in private giving over the past few years, who will provide?

Our three offices wrap services around families and individuals to help them achieve self-sufficiency. We offer emergency shelters and affordable housing; food and clothing for people who lack the means to provide for their families; education and workforce development programs that lead to employment; and after-school programs so working families can be assured that their children are well cared for and safe. And we are just a part of the non-profit network that depends on state funding to support the development of healthy families and communities.

While the rising costs of food, clothing and fuel are reverberating across all sectors of our neighborhoods from the affluent to working families the plight of those who struggle to secure the most basic of needs is overwhelming. Passing Question One would set us back decades and abrogate our responsibility for providing compassionate care for the less fortunate that is the very foundation of a civil society.

It would negate the pact we made when we organized ourselves as a "Commonwealth", which refers to a group of "people linked by common objectives and interests", to "the whole body of people", not just those with resources. And, ironically, passing Question One would almost certainly cause dramatic increases in local property taxes to make up the lost revenue, likely costing the average taxpayer the same in the end.

With continued economic uncertainty ahead we need to renew our commitment to the poor now more than ever, and we have confidence that the majority of Massachusetts' citizens feel the same way. Would it be good to pay less in taxes? Some might think so. It would be even better, though, for all of us to have homes we can afford, food for supper, safe neighborhoods, and an education that helps open up opportunities for future generations. We believe the citizens of Massachusetts genuinely want that for their neighbors. We just have to make sure this doesn't come down to checking a box at the end of a long, hard day at work.

Lisa Alberghini is President of the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, Judy Beckler is President of St. Mary's Women & Children's Center and Tiziana Dearing is President of Catholic Charities of Boston.