

**Declaration of the Louisiana Interchurch Conference (LIC) Board of Directors
For Access to SNAP (Food Stamps) September 29, 2015**

As religious leaders of the state of Louisiana, we are compelled to call attention to the moral dimensions of public policy and recommend laws that uphold the God-given dignity and rights of every person, each of whom is made in the image and likeness of God. Because we value family unity, justice, solidarity, and the humane treatment of all people, we must speak out and ask that our Governor, Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and Louisiana Legislature work to protect people from hunger by protecting the SNAP (food stamp) program from devastating cuts. The US Senate recently passed a budget agreement with no SNAP cuts. However, we have recently learned that due to a DCFS policy decision, as many as 70,000 Louisianians could lose access to food stamps next year. We urge to DCFS Secretary Suzy Sonnier and Gov. Bobby Jindal to reconsider this damaging decision. We take this action based on the following information:

- Under the 1996 welfare law, able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs) are limited to three months of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (SNAP, formerly food stamps) in a three-year period unless they are working 20 hours a week or enrolled in a job training program for 20 hours a week. But the same law that created the time limit allows states to request a waiver for areas with high unemployment where jobs are scarce. Louisiana is eligible for a statewide waiver in 2016 given our high unemployment rate. Louisiana has added 51,000 jobs since January 2013, but at the same time the labor force grew by 102,000 job seekers. Louisiana now has a higher unemployment rate than the nation.
- DCFS has chosen not to apply for a statewide waiver. Their position is that a waiver conflicts with a policy of promoting "self-sufficiency." We agree that a job paying a living wage is preferable to public assistance. But we also are aware of the reality that jobs--much less good-paying jobs--are scarce in many parts of our state. One option is to request a *partial* waiver targeting the parishes with the highest unemployment rates and obvious shortages of jobs, but DCFS has so far declined that option.
- Rates of food insecurity in Louisiana remain high. Surveys averaged over three years show 17.6 percent of Louisianians lacked food security over the 2012-2014 period, a huge increase from the 11.8 percent who were food insecure a decade ago and higher than the 14.1 percent in 2009-2011. Nationally, the rate is 14.3 percent. Denying SNAP to the unemployed will do nothing to increase the rate of job creation, but will increase food hardship and the burden on our local food banks already struggling to serve the hungry. People who will be cut off from food assistance because of this harsh rule are some of the poorest people in the state who are generally not eligible for any other type of assistance. Now, it will be harder for them to eat.
- If DCFS refuses to apply for a partial waiver targeting high-need areas, the state should at least commit itself to providing a job training spot to every single person who wants one so that they can keep their SNAP benefits while building their skills. Unfortunately, given budget constraints, that isn't likely to happen. Thousands will be punitively cut off from basic food assistance. This action does not represent our Louisiana values.

As religious leaders and representatives from around the State we urge each LIC member to contact DCFS Secretary Suzy Sonnier, Gov. Bobby Jindal and state legislators to urge them to apply for a statewide waiver, or at a minimum, for a partial waiver for parishes with the highest unemployment rates. In addition to advocacy for social justice, another priority of the Louisiana Interchurch Conference is prayer. Recognizing that Jesus calls all people to be one, we pray that our elected and appointed officials put human dignity and the common good at the center of their deliberations and work together across Louisiana to ensure that no child goes to bed hungry and no adult has to endure their suffering.