

Testimony for the Governor's Town Hall Meetings on the 2008 Budget

Rev. Alan G. Newton, Executive Minister of the American Baptist Churches of the Rochester/Genesee Region and Rochester Let Justice Roll

The late President, John F. Kennedy said in a speech on February 14, 1963, "The future promise of any nation can be directly measured by the present prospects of its youth.

What prospects are there for the more than 300,000 children living in poverty in New York State?

More than 300,000 children still require assistance to meet their most basic needs and there are many more eligible children who are not receiving public assistance.

There has not been an increase in the welfare grant for 17 years. How many of us in this room can say that this is true for us? How many of us have gone without a pay raise in these last 17 years? Legislators, state employees and the governor have all received pay increases. These pay increases fall on the backs of poor children.

This year the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families grant is \$291 a month for a family of 3. This basic grant is supposed to pay for all non-shelter costs such as clothing, household items, energy, transportation, laundry. Adjusting for inflation alone would mean bringing the grant up to \$475. This \$184 increase would bring the grant up to the 1990 levels. But the 1990 levels were inadequate. The basic allowance then brought families to 66% of the Federal Poverty Level. The grant today leaves a family at less than 50% of the Federal Poverty Level.

The shelter allowance in the public assistance grant is also inadequate. The allowance in Monroe County for a family of three with children is \$397 per month. I would challenge you to find adequate housing in Rochester for this amount. The HUD Fair Market Rent for a two bedroom apartment is \$687 a month.

I have heard our elected officials say that we cannot afford to increase the welfare grant.

We cannot afford not to increase it.

The state has the money. The federal TANF block grant has adequate funds to increase these funds to the poor. The state receives more than a billion dollars a year in excess of the benefits they provide to welfare participants. Nineteen (19) other states in the US have increased the welfare grant in their states with this money. New York unfortunately has taken a different track.

Testimony for the Governor's Town Hall Meetings on the 2008 Budget

Rev. Alan G. Newton, Executive Minister of the American Baptist Churches of the Rochester/Genesee Region and Rochester Let Justice Roll

The decision to increase the welfare grant is a decision to invest in our children's future. Continuation of the low public assistance payments will continue to place children in unsafe and dangerous conditions, it will continue to contribute to unequal learning opportunities, it will result in increased chronic malnourishment in children resulting in added health care costs, it will bring an increase in criminal activities and youth violence fueled by desperation and frustration.

The American Baptist Churches of the Rochester/Genesee region representing some 18,000 residents of Monroe and Livingston Counties and Let Justice Roll (an interfaith collaboration of religious and non-profits working to end poverty) are committed to eliminating poverty for children in New York State. We ask the Governor and the Legislators to demonstrate that they also are dedicated to this high and obtainable goal by increasing the TANF grants in the proposed budget.

I will be in prayer for you that you may find a way to do the right and moral thing for the children in New York State.