

March 7, 2005

Testimony in support of SB 29

Mme. Chair, Members of the Committee:

My name is Eric Schiedermayer. I represent the Montana Catholic Conference, the voice for Montana's Roman Catholic bishops in the state legislature, who in turn are the spiritual leaders of over 140,000 Montana Catholics.

The Catholic Church believes that one of the deepest and most far reaching attributes that God has revealed about himself is that of mercy. At the same time, we are not naïve. We understand that people can fall into patterns of self-destructive behavior – such as drug abuse – which are extremely difficult to break out of, and that people can abuse programs which are designed to help them. We also understand that public assistance programs can in fact have unintentional or unforeseen consequences; they can sometimes undermine the very good that they seek to accomplish.

We are convinced however, that an ethic of responsibility, rehabilitation, and restoration CAN become the foundation for the necessary reform of our criminal justice system. We believe that welfare policies CAN be designed to help families stay together and reward responsibility and sacrifice for children.

We believe that this bill meets these criteria.

This bill promotes personal responsibility and accountability. It does not carelessly hand out public money, nor does it categorically demand that drug felons have had their “last chance” and simply consign them to the trash heap of life. Nor does it consign their children to that fate.

If a person convicted of a drug felony serves their time in prison, gets out, and attempts to forge a new life, we need to do what we can to help. Not in a naïve or careless fashion, but judiciously. This bill does that by monitoring the person to make sure they continue to remain drug free.

This bill is not only the right thing to do from the viewpoint of compassion and mercy, it is also the right thing to do from a fiscal point of view. When families stay together, children do better. They are more likely to stay in school and to avoid the pitfalls of life – such as drug abuse – themselves. They are much more likely to become responsible, productive adults rather than struggling adults who themselves will require further assistance down the road.

Our decisions regarding public assistance programs must be assessed on whether they protect or undermine the dignity of the people they serve. We believe that this bill does the former, and we urge you to pass it.

Respectfully submitted,

Eric Schiedermayer

Executive Director, Montana Catholic Conference