

Support urged for social programs

Advocates for the poor are asking the governor and lawmakers not to make any budget cuts that would hurt low-income people.

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PROVIDENCE -- Ann Nolan said the man who showed up at Crossroads Rhode Island the other night in need of a sock illustrates a point about the nation we have become.

Nolan is executive director of Crossroads, an agency that serves the homeless. She spoke yesterday at a news conference meant to press Governor Carcieri and state lawmakers to keep programs for low-income people intact in this year's budget. Nolan was joined by religious leaders, social service providers and agency advocates.

"The man said, 'I only have one sock. I'm very cold,' " Nolan recalled.

Nolan said she searched through clothing donation bins at Crossroads, and found a single sock, but not a pair.

"I'm embarrassed," Nolan told the man. "I said, 'I only have one sock, not a pair.' " He said, 'That's all right. I only need one.' "

Nolan observed that this nation is now one "with two groups of people, those who have so much, and those who do not." And those who do not, "are not asking for much, only for one sock, when they only have one."

Nolan said, "On behalf of the 200 people sitting downstairs who have no home tonight," and on behalf of three families who had to sleep on cots at Crossroads on Monday night, "I implore the citizens of Rhode Island to take notice."

Kate Brewster, executive director of the Poverty Institute who also spoke on behalf of the One RI Coalition, said the news conference was meant to draw attention "to the growing number of Rhode Islanders, including thousands of working Rhode Islanders, at risk of homelessness and hunger this winter."

Brewster said dramatic spikes in energy and utility costs, at the same time wages have remained stagnant, have left many Rhode Islanders "in an untenable position. Poverty, uninsurance and income inequality have grown here in Rhode Island and across the nation."

Speakers took note of yesterday's U.S. Senate vote on a budget reconciliation bill that makes deep cuts to programs including Medicaid, child-support enforcement, welfare, SSI, and foster care.

The vote was 50-50 (Senators Jack Reed and Lincoln Chafee voted against the bill). Vice President Dick Cheney broke the tie and voted for the budget; amendments were adopted that require consideration by the House.

Rabbi Alan Flam, director of the Rhode Island Board of Rabbis, said, "Budgets are moral documents that reflect what we care about. Budget cuts to vital programs and tax bills that increase the deficit put our children's future in jeopardy and hurt vulnerable populations."

The rabbi said it is "a moral disgrace when bills are being debated in Congress to take food from the mouths of hungry citizens in order to increase the wealth of those sitting at a table overflowing with plenty. This is not what America is about."

Other speakers included the Rev. John E. Holt, executive minister of the Rhode Island State Council of Churches; the Rev. Bernard Healey, governmental liaison for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence, and the Right Rev. Geralyn Wolf, Episcopal bishop of Rhode Island.