

Lutheran Advocacy Ministry – New Mexico
Rocky Mountain Synod-ELCA

2017

Advocacy Agenda

Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM is called to advocate for justice in public policy, with a particular emphasis on alleviating poverty and hunger, by speaking with and for those with little or no political power and supporting ELCA members, congregations and ecumenical partners in the ministry of advocacy.

Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM works in an advocacy partnership with the NM Conference of Churches and the Presbytery of Santa Fe.



Rocky Mountain Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.



ELCA World Hunger
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Together we proclaim and embody God's unconditional love for the sake of the world
Christ's Church, Better Together

Background

Advocacy Policy Base

- The **institutional mandate** for the advocacy ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is rooted in the church's constitution and in the actions and statements of the ELCA. The ELCA Social Statements, Messages and Resolutions provide the basis for the positions and issues for which Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM advocates.
- The ***ELCA Constitution*** authorizes and encourages advocacy when it states that the church is to *"study social issues and trends, work to discover the causes of oppression and injustice, and develop programs of ministry and advocacy to further human dignity, freedom, justice, and peace in the world."*
- The ***ELCA Social Statement***, *"The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective"* (1991) sets forth the church's commitment to advocacy: *" . . . this church shall . . . work with and on behalf of the poor, the powerless, and those who suffer, using its power and influence to develop and advocate policies that seek to advance justice, peace, and the care of creation."*
- The ***ELCA Constitution's Continuing Resolutions*** endorse state advocacy ministries by directing the Congregational and Synodical Mission unit in *"facilitating the engagement of this church in advocacy."*

***Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM speaks on behalf of
the official positions of the ELCA as applied to
the specific context of public policy issues in New Mexico.***

Developing the Advocacy Agenda

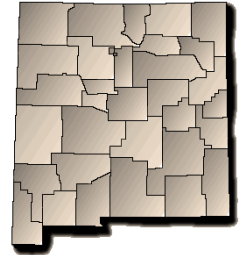
Our Advocacy Agenda is established every fall by the Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM Policy Committee. Four basic filters are used in prioritizing the issues for which we advocate:

- ✓ Do the official statements or actions of the ELCA provide a basis for addressing the issue? *References listed under **ELCA Policy Base** on the following pages are not exhaustive.*
- ✓ Is the issue timely and/or active in the context of public policy issues in New Mexico?
- ✓ Are there sufficient resources within Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM for effective advocacy on the issue?
- ✓ Are there other state advocacy groups or organizations working on the issue?

Context for Advocacy

The U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 American Community Survey reports that the poverty rate in New Mexico is still among the highest in the nation, with about 20% of New Mexicans living below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). The current FPL for a family of 3 is \$20,160. Beyond the overall state poverty rate, the situation for New Mexico's children is worse, with over 29% living in poverty. Additionally, more than 12% of New Mexico's seniors live in poverty. The 2016 Kids Count Data Book reports that our state still ranks 49th in child well-being.

The 2015 Map the Meal Gap report by Feeding America found that 17.3% of people living in our state are "food insecure," which means they have had to make changes in the quality or quantity of their food due to limited income or they have cut back or skipped meals on a frequent basis. In other words, more than 17% of New Mexicans experience hunger. Even worse is the rate of New Mexico's children who are experiencing hunger: 28%.



The National Low Income Housing Coalition's "Out of Reach 2016" reports that a New Mexican, working at our statewide minimum wage of \$7.50 (there are higher minimum wages in Albuquerque, Las Cruces & Santa Fe), would have to work 86 hours a week to be able to afford a two-bedroom apartment at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Fair Market Rent of \$835 per month. There are 243,406 renter households in New Mexico, which is 32% of all households.

New Mexico has more high-cost small loan stores than fast food chain locations. With interest rates from 80%-2700%, they are devouring low-income borrowers' paychecks, welfare payments, assets, and even their jobs.

Our state is in the midst of a severe revenue crisis. The state budget has been cut drastically over the past several years and more cuts are on the horizon. The recession hit New Mexico hard with state revenue crashing. Consequently, many essential and basic services have been cut. The tax cuts have been enacted since 2003 with the promise of bringing jobs to our state. Those tax cuts have made New Mexico overly dependent on revenue from oil and gas extraction, and now that the price of oil and gas has dropped, state revenue has plummeted. According to NM Voices for Children, about one-third of all new money has gone to tax cuts since 2013.

In response to the needs of people living in poverty and with hunger in our state, Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM continues to focus our work primarily on public policies and programs that can have a positive impact on people living in poverty and experiencing hunger. These policies and programs have at least two major goals:

- **To address systemic issues that can prevent people living in poverty from earning a family-sustaining income. Those issues can include tax policy, increasing the minimum wage, protecting workers' rights and capping storefront loans.**
- **To make various types of assistance available to people living in poverty to help meet basic living expenses. Adequate funding is required for basic assistance programs like Medicaid, affordable housing, nutrition assistance, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, as well as child care assistance. Programs must be administered in an efficient and fair manner.**

Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-New Mexico

2017 Advocacy Agenda Summary



Affordable Housing & Homelessness

- Support for the state Housing Trust Fund
- Programs that assist people experiencing homelessness

Family-Sustaining Income

Policies & programs that assist people living in poverty to work toward family-sustaining income

- Temporary Assistance to Needy Families
- Quality early childhood programs & childcare assistance
- Prevention of wage theft
- Raising the state minimum wage with inflation adjustments
- Regulation of predatory lending by enacting a 36% interest rate cap
- Right of workers to organize & bargain collectively

Health Care

- Outreach & enrollment of those eligible for Medicaid or the NM Health Insurance Exchange
- Creation of the mid-level profession of dental therapist to increase access to dental care

Hunger

- Protecting funding for the state SNAP supplement program & removing barriers to SNAP enrollment
- Efforts to close New Mexico's food gap & funding for food banks

Tax Policy

- Tax policy that is fair and provides stable, sustainable & adequate revenue to meet the needs of the our state, particularly the most vulnerable
- Effective oversight & review of state tax credits, exemptions & incentives

Criminal Justice

- Ending solitary confinement for juveniles and people with serious mental illness in prisons, jails & detention centers; restricting the use of solitary confinement for the general population in prisons, jails and detention centers
- Working against efforts to reinstate the death penalty

Note: The LAM-NM Policy Committee may add issues as opportunities might arise.

Affordable Housing & Homelessness

Overview: The cost of obtaining adequate housing in New Mexico continues to be difficult for many low-income people and families. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines affordable housing as that which does not cost more than 30% of a household's gross income. According to a Census Bureau study, over 50% of renters in New Mexico pay more than 30% of their income for housing. HUD reports that the 2016 Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom unit in New Mexico is \$835 per month. The National Low Income Housing Coalition has calculated that a worker would have to earn \$16.06 per hour, working 40 hours per week, to be able to afford a 2-bedroom unit at the 2016 New Mexico state Fair Market Rent.

Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM will advocate for:

- **Support for the state Housing Trust Fund:** Created in 2005, this fund provides a much-needed flexible source of funding for bricks and mortar projects designed to meet affordable housing needs of low-income people throughout our state. Over 2,100 units of low-income affordable housing have been partially funded by the state Housing Trust Fund.
- **Programs that assist people experiencing homelessness:** State funding is important to the continuity of services for people experiencing homelessness and to increasing the capacity of programs that work to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness. Recurring funding to increase the availability of supportive housing statewide, based on several successful models including the Albuquerque Heading Home model is crucial.



ELCA Policy Base: The ELCA social statement, *"Economic Life – A Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All"* states: "Sufficiency means adequate access to income and other resources that enable people to meet their basic needs, including nutrition, clothing, housing, health care, personal development, and participation in community with dignity."

The ELCA Message on *"Homelessness"* states: "Christians walk with the homeless when they join with others to . . . advocate policies that seek to provide job training, employment opportunities, housing, education, health care, and support for the homeless." "Adequate housing is needed for humane living." "Housing is a fundamental human right."

Family-Sustaining Income

Overview: New Mexico's poverty rate of over 20% is among the highest in the nation. More alarming is the fact that over 29% of our children live in poverty. It is important that family-sustaining jobs are available throughout our state. When such jobs are not available, public policies and programs that assist low-income people to meet their basic living expenses and address barriers to employment are necessary. These supportive programs include cash assistance as well as child care assistance and asset-building programs that can help people living in poverty to achieve family-sustaining income. It is also important that public policies to address systemic issues that can enable families to earn family-sustaining income be enacted.

Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM will advocate for:

- **Temporary Assistance to Needy Families:** Many TANF recipients have multiple barriers to employment, including lack of education, child care, transportation, domestic violence and chronic health problems. It is crucial that these barriers be addressed so that recipients can move into long-term family-sustaining employment.
- **Child care assistance & quality early childhood programs:** It is important that child care assistance be available to working parents so that they know that their children are being cared for in a quality safe environment. It is also important that there be dedicated funding for early childhood education and programs like home visiting and Pre-K.
- **Prevention of wage theft:** Wage theft occurs when workers are not paid what they have earned. Examples include: not paying for overtime, not paying the minimum wage, making workers work "off the clock" or not paying workers at all. Effective enforcement of the Wage Theft Prevention Act is needed.



- **Increasing the state minimum wage with adjustments for inflation:** The state minimum wage is now \$7.50 and is not linked to inflation. Someone working full-time at \$7.50 makes only \$15,600, which is below the federal poverty level for a family of two (\$16,020).
- **Regulation of predatory lending by enacting a 36% interest rate cap:** In 2013, 164,500 customers repaid \$1,260 on the average \$653 loan with an average interest rate of 340%. Capping loan interest and fees at 36% would keep at least \$89 million in New Mexico's low income pockets annually.
- **The right of workers to organize & bargain collectively:** LAM-NM opposes efforts to repeal the right of workers to organize.

ELCA Policy Base: The ELCA *Social Statement “Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All”* calls for: “addressing the barriers individuals face in preparing for and sustaining a livelihood (such as lack of education, transportation, child care, and health care).”

The ELCA Social Statement “*Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*” also calls for: “tax credits and other means of supplementing the insufficient income of low-paid workers in order to move them out of poverty ...”

The ELCA Social Statement “*Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*” also calls for: “government enforcement of regulations against discrimination, exploitative work conditions and labor practices (including child labor), and for the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively.”

Health Care

Overview: The church is called to be an active participant in bringing about a just and effective health care system that is available to all, particularly people living in poverty. While the rates of the uninsured have dropped under the Affordable Care Act, it remains very important that eligible New Mexicans are aware of and enroll in health coverage that is now available to them.

Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM will advocate for:

- **Effective outreach & enrollment of those eligible for Medicaid or the NM Health Insurance Exchange**

Exchange: The federal Affordable Care Act relies on implementation by states. The New Mexico Health Insurance Exchange which assists low-income people and small businesses to find affordable health insurance is now operational. .



Medicaid is a means-tested entitlement program that provides health insurance benefits to low-income families and individuals who meet certain requirements. Medicaid is an effective income support program for people living in poverty. Under the Affordable Care Act, Medicaid is now available to adults with income up to 138% of the Federal Poverty Level. It is estimated that over 250,000 people in our state are now enrolled through this expansion of Medicaid, including many people experiencing homelessness. Medicaid expansion is a substantial boost to our economy with increased economic activity in the health care sector.

- **Creation of the mid-level profession of dental therapy:** New Mexico doesn't have enough dentists. As a result, thousands of New Mexicans can't get dental care when they need it, where they live. Creating the profession of dental therapy is a good way to bring dental health care to more New Mexicans.

ELCA Policy Base: The ELCA Social Statement “*Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor*” states: “Health care is the kind of good most appropriately given on the basis of need.” . . . “Justice also requires a fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of health care.” . . . “we urge all people to advocate for access to basic health care for all and to participate vigorously and responsibly in the public discussion on how best to fulfill this obligation.” . . . “As the guarantors of justice and promoters of the general welfare, governments also have the unique role of ensuring equitable access to health care for all.”

The ELCA social statement “*Caring for Health: Our Shared Endeavor*” supports: “. . . equitable access for all people to basic health care services and to the benefits of public health efforts.”

The ELCA Social Statement “*Economic Life – A Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*” calls for: “addressing the barriers individuals face in preparing for and sustaining a livelihood (such as lack of education, transportation, child care, and health care) . . . public policies that ensure adequate social security, unemployment insurance, and health care coverage.”

Hunger

Overview: While hunger in New Mexico may not look as stark as in the Third World, it is a reality. Our state is consistently ranked among those with the highest rates of poverty in the country at about 20%, and over 29% of our children live in poverty. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reports on hunger and food insecurity: “Food insecurity” means that a household has limited or uncertain access to enough safe, nutritious food. These households have reduced quality and variety of meals, and may have irregular food intake. There may be a need to seek emergency food sources or other extraordinary coping behaviors to meet their basic food needs.” New Mexico’s incidence of food insecurity is among the highest in the nation (over 17%). Since poverty and hunger are solidly linked, we must work to reduce poverty.



Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM will advocate for:

- **Increased funding for the state SNAP supplement program & against barriers to SNAP eligibility:** Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM helped to create the State SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) Supplement program, which ensured that seniors and others in New Mexico, who were receiving the federal minimum monthly benefit of \$16, would receive a minimum benefit of at least \$25 through state funding. We advocate increasing that minimum amount to \$30 per month for the over 11,000 people that use this vital state program.

- **Efforts to close New Mexico’s food gap & funding for food banks:** Many low-income New Mexicans live in rural areas. Recent studies have confirmed that there is a need to increase access to nutritious and affordable foods in these rural areas. New Mexico’s food banks provide emergency nutrition assistance to many low-income families. State funding has assisted the transportation of fresh produce for use in food banks and the other agencies that distribute food.

ELCA Policy Base: The ELCA Social Statement *“Economic Life – A Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All”* states: “We call for . . . government to provide adequate income assistance and related services for citizens, documented immigrants, and refugees who are unable to provide for their livelihood through employment.”

The ELCA Social Statement *“Economic Life – A Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All”* also states: “We call for . . . adequate, consistent public funding for the various low-income services non-profit organizations provide for the common good of all.”

Tax Policy

Overview: Government budgets involve two major elements: expenditures and revenues. Government budgets are reflections of our values and priorities and can thus be considered moral documents. How and from whom revenues are raised, as well as on what and for whom those revenues are expended, are strong indicators of our community’s values. Government is an expression of our community together. As people of faith, we value community and we are dedicated to serving “the least of these.” Consequently, when public policy is made regarding our tax system, as well as when the state budget is developed, that policy must be evaluated in terms of how it affects the community and especially how it affects the most vulnerable among us.

Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM will advocate for:

- **Tax policy that is fair and provides stable, sustainable & adequate revenue to meet the needs of our state, particularly the most vulnerable:** A good tax system should be fair (distribute the tax burden broadly and progressively, with those with higher income paying more), balanced, accountable, and able to be efficiently administered. Tax policy should be designed to provide adequate, stable and sustainable revenue to meet the needs of all, particularly the most vulnerable among us. Most of the revenue for New Mexico state government comes from three types of taxes, including: the personal and corporate income tax,



severance taxes (i.e., taxes on extractive industries which are aimed at compensating the state for the loss of an irreplaceable natural resource like oil or natural gas), and the gross receipts tax.

- **Effective oversight & review of state tax credits, exemptions & incentives:** Ongoing oversight of tax credits, exemptions and incentives is needed to provide the information for policy makers to determine which tax credits and incentives are effective and beneficial and which are not.

ELCA Policy Base: The ELCA Social Statement *“Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All”* states: “Government is intended to serve God’s purposes by limiting or countering narrow economic interests and promoting the common good. Paying taxes to enable government to carry out these and other purposes is an appropriate expression of our stewardship in society, rather than something to be avoided.”

The ELCA Social Statement *“Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All”* also calls for: “tax credits and other means of supplementing the insufficient income of low-paid workers in order to move them out of poverty ... correction of regressive tax systems, so that people are taxed progressively in relation to their ability to pay.”

Criminal Justice

Overview: In recent decades, corrections systems have increasingly relied on solitary confinement as a prison



management tool. But solitary confinement jeopardizes our public safety, is extremely costly and fundamentally inhumane. In New Mexico, this practice has been both over-used and misused,

resulting in costly litigation that wastes taxpayer dollars. Solitary confinement typically involves locking an inmate alone in a cell for 22 hours a day, under conditions of extreme social isolation and forced idleness, and deprivation of almost all meaningful environmental stimulation, including restrictions on property, severe limitations on visitations and a total ban on group activities. In such instances, prisoners are usually confined to cells no bigger than an ordinary parking space. There is a broad consensus among mental health experts that deep psychological harm can result from prolonged solitary confinement.

The death penalty was repealed in New Mexico in 2009, recently efforts have been made to reinstate the death penalty for specific crimes.

Lutheran Advocacy Ministry-NM will advocate for:

- **Ending solitary confinement for juveniles and people with serious mental illness in prisons, jails & detention centers; restricting the use of solitary confinement for the general population**

in prisons, jails and detention centers: The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry says solitary confinement of juveniles can lead to depression, anxiety and even psychosis. In recent years, seven states have passed laws that limit or prohibit the use of solitary confinement for youth in detention facilities. Many of the prisoners subjected to solitary confinement have serious mental illness and the conditions of solitary confinement can exacerbate their symptoms or provoke recurrence.

- **Working against efforts to reinstate the death penalty:** Since 1973, more than 150 innocent men and women have been released from death rows across the country. In New Mexico, four innocent men were convicted and sentenced to death based on false witness testimony and police misconduct during the 1970s. In 2001, New Mexico conducted its first execution in 41 years. It is important that we work to ensure that no further executions take place in our state.

ELCA Policy Base: The ELCA Social Statement *“The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries”* states “as people of faith we reject dehumanization of the incarcerated through brutalizing means whether legal, psychological, sexual, emotional, racial, cultural, or spiritual . . . widespread and long-term total isolation in solitary confinement.”

The ELCA Social Statement *“The Death Penalty”* states “Despite its attempts to provide legal safeguards, the death penalty has not been and cannot be made fair . . . since human beings are fallible, the innocent have been executed in the past and will inevitably be executed in the future . . . it is because of this church’s concern regarding the actual use of the death penalty that we oppose its imposition.” “We urge the abolition of the death penalty, and support alternative and appropriate punishment for capital crime, including the possibility of life sentence without parole.”