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Kentucky's Excessive Tax Burden on Low-wage Earners

Legislative Testimony
Interim Joint Appropriations and Revenue Committee

Presented by: Scott A. Wegenast, Policy Analyst
16 August 2001

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Scott Wegenast and I am a Policy Analyst at the Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK). CCK is the official public policy voice for the state's four Roman Catholic Bishops. It is a privilege to appear before you all on this important issue.

My colleagues with Kentucky Youth Advocates have done fine work in presenting the facts in support of income tax relief for the state's low-wage workers and their families. My purpose in appearing before you is to serve as a voice for those workers. As you may guess, these same workers are not able to be here today because they are at work processing the cheap chicken we find in our grocery stores, they are caring for our aging relatives in nursing homes, they are providing day care for our children, and they are collecting our trash in our home towns. As a society we owe them our thanks, but more importantly our government is obligated to bring them justice in the form of tax fairness. I am here to speak once again in support of low income tax relief and a refundable earned income tax credit for all those who work (and especially their children) but continue to live in poverty.

For the past three years, the Catholic Conference has been a partner in the Tax Fairness Coalition. Collectively, this coalition has voiced the call for targeted, low income tax relief before Governor Patton and members of the General Assembly. I believe our message has been heard here in the Capital and most of you are now aware of how important and urgent this issue is for our fellow Kentuckians who are working for low wages.

We recognize that the work of this committee is vitally important for the future fiscal soundness of our state government. As your work progresses, I urge each of you to make tax fairness for low-wage workers a top priority in whatever recommendations are brought forth in the 2002 General Assembly. Far too many Kentuckians have left welfare for low-wage, dead-end jobs that cannot support a family above the poverty line, far too many Kentuckians lack access to affordable health care, and far too many parents are working long hours and yet their children live below the poverty line. It is a grave injustice to further burden these working families with an excessive and outdated income tax structure. Kentucky can and must do what is just for all who labor, but remain in poverty.

The refundable earned income tax credit is not new. In many states, a refundable state earned income tax credit has proven to be an effective means to lift many working families out of poverty and relieve the burden of state and local taxes on poor families. The taxes our state imposes on low-income families are reflective of our public policy priorities. I ask that each of you give the highest consideration of the information presented today by Kentucky Youth Advocates and Representative Wayne and make low-income tax relief a top priority in the 2002 General Assembly.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Catholic bishops in Kentucky and the many thousands of low-income working families in our state who deserve tax fairness.

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