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WASHINGTON (RNS)—A coalition of Christian and Jewish groups urged Congress to stop keeping welfare alive with temporary extensions and instead move to a long-term overhaul of the program.

Ten mainline Protestant churches were joined by anti-hunger groups, Jewish organizations and a Catholic social justice group to urge a five-year reauthorization of the 1996 welfare law.

“Congress is denying the states the certainty of funding and clarity of program direction that they need to operate their programs most effectively,” said a recent letter to senators from the Interreligious Working Group on Domestic Human Needs.

Temporary Aid to Needy Families originally was set to expire in September 2002. Unable to reach agreement, Congress has passed seven temporary extensions. The most recent, in late June, funds the program at current levels through Sept. 30.

The House has passed one version that increases weekly work requirements for welfare recipients from 30 to 40 hours per week and

provides marriage incentives.

The Senate version proposes a 34-hour work week but adds increased money for child care. That measure has not reached the Senate floor because of disputes on whether to include an increase in the minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7 per hour.

“We are extremely disappointed that Congress has not yet passed a long-term reauthorization to strengthen the program so families can move out of poverty,” said the letter., which was signed by the Washington offices of American Baptist Churches USA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, Friends Committee on National Legislation, the National Council of Churches and NETWORK, a national Catholic social justice lobby, among others.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.