News



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Robert Archie knows he'd be homeless if it wasn't for the Rapid Re-housing program run by Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Trenton, New Jersey.

A data specialist with the New Jersey Department of Human Services, Archie has been in the program since mid-2018. He told Catholic News Service it has brought stability to his life: He's no longer on the streets, has paid off long-standing debt and helps support his 12-year-old son.

While Archie, 40, is set to move out of the program at the end of January -- by design -- some of his friends benefitting from it are wondering what's going to happen Feb. 1 when Catholic Charities will no longer be receiving Department of Housing and Urban Development funds to run it because of the partial federal government shutdown.

"In my opinion, it would be devastating for a program like this to take a hit during a time like this when the country actually needs it," Archie said.

Mosudi Idowu, the program's director for Catholic Charities in Trenton, said 27 people face questions about their housing situation. He said they are afraid of being forced into a shelter or even the streets in the peak of winter.

He also expressed concern that there appears no end in sight to the nearly monthlong shutdown.

"If it goes on indefinitely, it will affect all of our programs," Idowu told CNS. "We're talking to our congressional representative and city officials to let them now of the impact of the shutdown on our program."

The Trenton program receives funds under HUD's the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program, which was established under the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act adopted in response to the Great Recession.

The program provides short-term rental assistance and other services to people who are homeless or are facing homelessness. Its goals include helping people find housing quickly, increasing self-sufficiency and making sure people stay housed.

In the short term, Idowu and his staff are providing referrals to other community agencies that may have money to prevent homelessness.

At the same time, Idowu is just as concerned for his own family because he faces either being laid off or working without a paycheck beginning in February.

"We advise the government to open for business," Idowu said. "They need a plan that will really work for the people."

Key government-funded programs -- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Section 8 rent subsidies and Department of Agriculture's Farm Services Agency -- are the focus of efforts by Catholic Charities USA to press Congress and the Trump administration to end the shutdown.

"We're giving them a reminder that this isn't a Washington problem. We're reminding people it's also your local communities that are being affected," Lucas Swanepoel, vice president for social policy at Catholic Charities USA, told CNS.

Under federal rules, several states have advanced February payments to people enrolled in SNAP, formerly known as food stamps. Notices have advised enrollees to properly budget so their allotment will carry through Feb. 28.

But in some communities, Catholic Charities agencies already are offering food distribution to federal employees and contractors and are preparing contingencies to fill other human needs gaps that might emerge should the shutdown last for weeks more.

Federal workers have already missed one paycheck but are expected to receive back pay. However, people who work for government contractors, largely in low-wage jobs, have been laid off and are not guaranteed of making up their lost income, creating a potentially new pool of clients for agencies.

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In the Diocese of Salt Lake City, the shutdown has become a major concern in Ogden, Utah, where more than 5,000 people are employed by the Internal Revenue Service alone.

"A lot of the jobs in this area are some of the more entry-level positions," said Maresha Bosgieter, director of Catholic Community Services of Northern Utah. "They're still living paycheck to paycheck. For those families, not knowing when they will receive their next paycheck can be very stressful."

Catholic Community Services' Joyce Hansen Hall food bank has seen a 50 percent increase in clients from the usual 100 families a day that come through its doors.

"If this (shutdown) goes on too long, we may have to reach out to our partners and the public for extra assistance," Bosgieter said.

In the Archdiocese of Washington, federal workers in need have received emergency funds. Catholic Social Services of the Miami Valley based in Dayton, Ohio, has started sending a food truck to outlying areas more frequently than the usual once or twice a month. Several agencies are raising funds directly for federal workers. And in Dallas, Honolulu and Burlington, Vermont, while agencies were feeling minimal impact in mid-January, staffers were gearing up to respond to needs should demand for services grow.

Meanwhile, Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio, is not just preparing to respond to increased needs because of the shutdown, but it is also planning for the March closure of the General Motors assembly plant in Lordstown.

Rachel Hrbolich, diocesan director of Catholic Charities, said she expects her agency will see people seeking assistance for rent or mortgage payments.

In addition, she added, the cutoff of government reimbursements for social services is expected to stress the agency.

"It's almost like a double whammy. The people face a lack of resources and the agency's facing a lack of funding," Hrbolich told CNS.

"Come March what are we going to do?" she asked.

"We have to work as a community to try to keep people steady, that things hold steady. We're just praying that this thing can be over. It's going to have a big effect if things aren't resolved soon."

Robert McCann, president and CEO of Catholic Charities Spokane, Washington, told CNS that Section 8 project-based voucher contracts were being renewed as the shutdown began and that those contracts remain unsigned, jeopardizing housing for low-income senior citizens, families and disabled people.

His agency also began accumulating additional food and contributing money into a reserve fund in December to meet growing needs, especially in rural areas.

"If the shutdown were to actually continue for months, and we pray it does not, you could see tens of thousands of people in the Diocese of Spokane who had already been living at or below the federal poverty line end up being propelled further downward into outright food insecurity and even homelessness," he said.

"The shutdown seems to boil down to the digging in of heels and the building of walls," McCann added. "If it continues long enough, it will start to build a wall around our ability to reveal God's love to the poor and vulnerable and dig already fragile people into a bigger hole than they already find themselves in."

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Contributing to this story was Linda Peterson, who writes for Intermountain Catholic, newspaper of the Diocese of Salt Lake City.