News



A Catholic Relief Services worker is pictured in a file photo helping a young woman at a food distribution area in Marojela village, located in the Marolinta commune in southern Madagascar's Beloha District. (OSV News/Courtesy of Catholic Relief Services/Jim Stipe)

Gina Christian

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Baltimore — May 20, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Hundreds of Catholic humanitarian workers are rallying to prevent further — more permanent — reductions in U.S. federal funding for international aid, which has been slashed under the Trump administration as part of its "America First" policy.

Catholic Relief Services, the official humanitarian agency of the Catholic Church in the U.S., hosted a May 17 national online meeting with some 375 participants to mobilize congressional lobbying against additional long-term cuts known as rescissions.

During the one-hour gathering which blended prayer, praise and presentations — CRS community engagement manager Beth Knobbe noted that CRS has already seen "69 programs terminated in over 30 countries" under Trump administration cuts to date.

If approved, Trump administration's proposed rescissions would see Congress — which constitutionally holds the power of the purse — cancel previously appropriated funds for humanitarian and development assistance, while reducing or eliminating the budget lines for future funding of these areas.

Under the 1974 Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act, the Trump administration can submit a proposal to expeditiously delay or rescind budget authority for spending.

In its preliminary fiscal year 2026 budget, the administration seeks to ax some $9 billion in total, with rescissions focusing on foreign aid as well as an array of domestic initiatives.

In effect, "the administration is asking Congress to reduce the overall pool of money that exists to fund international assistance programs," explained Chris West, director of CRS' partnership, training and engagement unit.

West told call participants — most of whom hailed from CRS' coast-to-coast network of volunteer chapters — the rescissions were "dangerous because the decisions that are made could affect how much money will likely be available in next year's federal budget and in the budgets for years to come."

He likened the move to buckets filled with water, with the "bucket" representing "the different accounts within the U.S. budget," such as "international disaster assistance or food assistance," and the "water" being "the actual money that Congress allocates" that enables CRS and other organizations to operate their programs.

U.S. foreign aid amounts to a tiny fraction of annual federal spending, ranging from 0.7% to 1.4% of what the federal government spends money on every year since fiscal year 2001 according to Pew Research. Pew's analysis showed fiscal year 2023's $71.9 billion spent on foreign aid was just 1.2% of the federal government's $6.1 trillion outlays that year.

West said that the move to "shrink the buckets" of foreign aid means "less assistance to a growing need in the world."

Heidi Jones, a member of the CRS chapter in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, shared the impact of Trump administration cuts on aid to programs in the Diocese of Kitui, Kenya, with which the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis has a partnership.

Jones told call participants that she has "seen the life-saving impact of U.S. foreign aid assistance," having traveled to Kenya in 2017 and witnessed those programs in action — such as one village initiative in which "women were the main builders of an earthen dam, shoveling by hand."

The women "built a healthier community, and they developed a great deal of pride and ownership for this tremendous great good," said Jones.

But, she said, Caritas Kitui has recently advised that a $750,000 water project, supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development, "has stopped" following the Trump administration's decision to shutter USAID.

"This is a very high-drought area," said Jones. "The farmers will not get trained in sustainable practices."

"Families have lost their household income," she said. "Medicines for HIV, malaria and tuberculosis have stopped being distributed. And children will not be educated

because they cannot afford the school fees. The losses are great and widespread."

Advertisement

Knobbe said that while "the timing is still a little bit unclear" on the administration's rescissions package, "a 45-day clock" will start ticking as soon as the proposed rescissions reach Congress.

"Once the voting starts, we expect it's going to move quickly," she said.

CRS is urging supporters to contact their elected officials as soon as possible through dedicated links in English (support.crs.org/act/budget) and Spanish (support.crs.org/abogar/presupuesto).

"We need members of Congress to know that their constituents care about international assistance," West said, emphasizing that this is a use of taxpayer dollars consistent with their fundamental beliefs.

"Our faith and our values compel us to respond to the magnitude of the needs around the world, by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, protecting the lives of babies and pregnant women, and so many other vulnerable people around the world," said West.

Some lawmakers are already aware of CRS' urgent efforts to preserve foreign aid assistance — including Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, R-Pa., who joined the call, and Rep. Johnny Olszewski, D-Md., who provided a pre-recorded video message.

Fitzpatrick, a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, pointed to his Catholic faith, saying Jesus Christ's warning in Mt 25:40, "'that which you do to the least of my people, you do to me' … rings through me and my brain all day, every day."

"And it's really impacted the way I think, the way I approach a lot of problem-solving," he said.

"When you're talking about human lives and human dignity and America's role in the world, we should be able to come to a reasonable agreement that we have a responsibility to take are of the least among us, here in America and overseas," he said. "That we have a responsibility to treat diseases … to feed the hungry; that

those are human responsibilities."

He stressed that his "bipartisan viewpoint" to the foreign aid cuts allows him to support both international assistance and government efficiency.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk, known to be the world’s richest billionaire, targeted USAID for closure as part of his Department of Government Efficiency, an unofficial task force with the stated intent of curbing federal spending. DOGE eviscerated funding for efforts by Catholic and other faith-based humanitarian groups all over the globe, leaving a rump 18% of USAID programs to continue under the purview of the State Department.

"We can say on the one hand that we have an obligation to maintain these programs ... not let anybody fall through the cracks, not let any child die of a terrible disease, not let ... anybody else go hungry anywhere in this world," said Fitzpatrick. "We should also be able to say that we shouldn't be afraid to fix things that are broken."

"By strengthening the system, you can actually help the people that need it most," he said.

He also told CRS call participants that they should "have some level of comfort" that he and fellow lawmakers in Congress "are going to be very, very mindful of what comes before us, and making sure we don't harm any of these programs."

"I mean this from the bottom of my heart: You are truly doing the Lord's work," he said.

Bill O'Keefe, CRS executive vice president for mission, mobilization and advocacy, thanked Fitzpatrick for his consistent work across the aisles, noting that Pope Leo XIV — whose inauguration Mass in Rome took place the day after the CRS call — "is already talking about dialogue and encounter and building bridges," as did his predecessor, the late Pope Francis.

In his video message, Rep. Olszewski — a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee — highlighted both Pope Francis and Pope Leo, saying, "We know we live in a moment of real global challenge, from hunger and poverty, to conflict and climate displacement."

"These aren't partisan issues, they're human issues," Olszewski said. "And I'm glad to stand alongside you and those who are in Congress who are willing to step up and

say we understand that moral leadership doesn't stop at our borders."

"As a person of deep faith myself, my beliefs call me to lead with compassion, to listen with an open heart, and to act with a commitment for justice, just like Jesus did — just like you all do every day," he said.

NCR is an independent nonprofit and relies on support from readers like you, especially at this crucial moment in church history. Please donate here to the Spring Fund Drive.