News




Catholic Charities New York CEO J. Antonio Fernández during a recent site visit in the South Bronx, New York, Sept. 2025. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York)



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In June 2022, as emergency lights flashed on the outskirts of San Antonio, Texas, J. Antonio Fernández was called to a scene that would mark both his career and his personal life.

A tractor trailer packed with Mexican and Central American migrants had been left in the Texas heat. Fifty-three people died inside, including eight children and one pregnant woman.

Fernández, who was CEO of Catholic Charities in San Antonio at the time, visited the survivors that night at local hospitals. "No one could speak," he recalled. "Some of them were starting to be aware of things. We were praying with them."



A woman in El Paso, Texas, lights candles during a vigil July 5, 2022, to honor the 53 migrants who died in a cargo truck in San Antonio June 27. (CNS/Reuters/Jose Luis Gonzalez)

The next day, the 14 survivors were sent to Catholic Charities for immediate assistance.

Six weeks after the truck was found, Fernández returned to the site. The heat still pressed down, the ground dry and cracked from weeks of 100-degree days. A woman approached him and hesitated before speaking. She thought she had found a body.

He did what she asked and called the police. The officers brought in fire crews, then federal agents. What they uncovered confirmed the woman's fear. "That was a body who had been on the site for 45 days," Fernández said. The remains were almost unrecognizable. "You could see the bones because of the heat in San Antonio, over 100 degrees. Through the packets, we were able to find out he was an immigrant from Guatemala."

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For Fernández, it was a moment that stripped away any abstraction about border policy or migrant flows. "I saw a cadaver," he said, pausing on the word. "And that was maybe the most horrible story I can tell you about human trafficking and immigration that has touched my life forever and ever."

Three years later, in September 2025, Fernández was at a Catholic Charities food pantry in East Harlem, helping volunteers distribute food and open packages for New Yorkers in need.




Catholic Charities New York CEO J. Antonio Fernández dressed in a white shirt, supervises a food pantry at St. Cecilia's Church in East Harlem, New York, Sept. 2025. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

On Sept. 15, he became the first layperson to lead Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York, an organization that serves more than 400,000 people annually.

With more than two decades of leadership experience in Chicago and San Antonio, Fernández now oversees one of the most complex Catholic Charities networks in the United States — a federation of 90 agencies working across ten counties. He succeeds Msgr. Kevin Sullivan, who has transitioned into an emeritus role.



Catholic Charities New York CEO J. Antonio Fernández during a recent site visit in Yonkers, Sept. 2025. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York)

Fernández arrived in the U.S. as a young adult, initially intending to study English in Chicago for just a few months. What was meant to be a short stay stretched into years. "To the point that I found a woman in my life, and I decided to stay in the

United States," he recalled in an interview with NCR in the new Midtown headquarters of the Archdiocese of New York.

The city's energy and challenges shaped him, and while he built a career as a therapist and case manager on the Chicago West Side, he also sought stability beyond work. Holy Name Cathedral became that anchor, a place where he could find belonging amid a city that often felt isolating. "I think there's a difference between being alone and being lonely," he said. Surrounded by millions, he felt adrift at first, unable to understand the language or the rhythms of life around him. The cathedral offered a community and a connection that helped him feel at home.

His immigrant background has remained central to his perspective. Fernández said in the people Catholic Charities serves, he sees a reflection of his own journey.

"Those Spanish roots are the roots of an immigrant who came for the American dream, who came to study and to have a better life. So when I have met hundreds of thousands of immigrants over the years, I can feel their pain coming to America just because of the better life."

That empathy informs his work today, especially as he assumes leadership in New York during a period of financial uncertainty.




Catholic Charities New York CEO J. Antonio Fernández interacts with a mother and baby during a recent site visit in Yonkers, Sept. 2025. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York)

A spokesperson for Catholic Charities New York said federal funding for the nonprofit has been cut by $11 million this year, or 17% of its public support. Immigration services have been hit hardest and food programs stretched thin. Fernández recalls the painful choices he faced in Texas, where nearly 200 employees had to be let go when grants ended. "It's a tough situation, but at the end of the day, it's like when we have new grants, we can hire people. When the grants stop, then we have to let people go and hopefully wish them the best, or hire them if we can hire in other programs."

In New York, local support has softened the blow. The city and state have stepped in to fund programs that might have otherwise been cut, allowing Catholic Charities to continue reaching immigrants and vulnerable populations, even as staffing reductions remain unavoidable. Fernández said that the pressures extend beyond immigration. Food pantries, potential cuts to SNAP, and other social services all

affect the agency's capacity to meet demand.




Catholic Charities New York CEO J. Antonio Fernández during a recent site visit in the South Bronx, New York, Sept. 2025. (Courtesy of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York)

Navigating legal boundaries — as U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents speed up deportations of undocumented immigrants — while maintaining a humanitarian mission is a core challenge, he said. Fernández emphasized that Catholic Charities follows the law in all its services, but it also remains committed to assisting anyone in need, Catholic or not.

"Catholic Charities follows the law in the provision of all of our services, but we also will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to everyone who comes to us for help — Catholic and Non-Catholic alike — because that is what Jesus calls us to do in the Gospel," he said.

The agency's work reaches far beyond numbers. Catholic Charities distributes more than 10 million meals each year, yet hunger and poverty continue to isolate

thousands of New Yorkers.



Catholic Charities New York CEO J. Antonio Fernández helps carry and open food boxes at a food pantry at St. Cecilia’s Church in East Harlem, New York, Sept. 2025. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Ensuring the agency's long-term stability requires more than government funding. Fernández said Catholic Charities New York is now focusing on private partnerships, corporate support and community networks. "If we don't have help from the government, we really need to put this in our backs," he said. Building connections in New York is part of that effort. Though new to the city, he is working to forge relationships that will help Catholic Charities not just feed people, but help them escape poverty.

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Political neutrality is another guiding principle he follows. With an important mayoral election approaching, Fernández insists that Catholic Charities is not aligned with any political party. Discussions with candidates, including Democratic frontrunner Zohran Mamdani, are about services, not politics.

"Catholic Charities should not be an agency of the left or the right. We should be an agency of the people. We should be an agency of God."

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