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## 'One year after the collapse we need bold solutions to poverty'

by Larry Snyder



The first anniversary of the economic collapse is not one anyone wants to mark, but we note it this week.

A year ago the news of Lehman Brothers' collapse and AIG's near collapse stunned our nation, led to a global economic crisis and was followed by an infusion of hundreds of billions of bailout dollars to preserve the country's financial system.

Our Catholic Charities' clients had made us well aware that an economic downturn was already underway, but we could not have fathomed what was about to occur last September. Nor could we envision the thousands of families who would seek assistance for the first time: they were now poor.

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Catholic Charities aid rose in 2009 and still rising in 2010

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The need for our services has catapulted to unprecedented levels. Parents who lost their jobs or now work

reduced hours; children hungry for a healthy meal; senior citizens incapable of paying the heating bill: they all knock at our doors. We, in the best way we know how, serve them without question. Catholic Charities works with and among the poor every day. We know them. They trust us. Their numbers are increasing.

Last week the Census Bureau reported the nation's poverty rate climbed to 13.2 percent in 2008 - 39.5 million Americans - up from 12.5 percent in 2007. 46.3 million have no health insurance. The number of unemployed persons has risen by 7.4 million since the recession began.

During this time our 1,700 agencies across the country served 8.5 million people, an increase of 10.2 percent from 2007. This is not a cause for celebration. It is a deplorable fact. Clients needing basic services (clothing, utilities, prescriptions and emergency financial aid) increased 11 percent. Clients seeking housing services increased 12 percent. Employment services increased 35 percent.

These disconcerting reports do not include the impacts on the hundreds of thousands who lost their jobs or health insurance during the first eight months of 2009.

The economic downturn has stretched Catholic Charities' resources and forced us to do more with less.

- A Catholic Charities clinic in Pittsburgh adds 100 patients monthly. They see people who were not uninsured before. "It's scary for them," says the administrator, "they're not used to asking for help."
- In Delaware, Catholic Charities receives thousands of requests for assistance from neighbors throughout Delaware and Maryland's Eastern Shore. Many who ask for help have never before been in this position.
- The food pantry at Catholic Charities of High Springs, Florida, like others around the country, has empty shelves and is in need of food. "The demand for food has been higher and the donations have been lower," says its director. "I'm not even giving as much as I want to give. I send everybody off with a bag. Whatever I've got, that's what I give."
- In Scarsdale, New York, where the estimated 2007 median household income was \$222,000 (median income was \$53,514 in New York), Catholic Charities held a Career Counseling Seminar for high level professionals who find themselves unemployed in a tough market - a new experience.

Glimpses of financial recovery now buoy some but the journey out of poverty will be long and arduous for those we serve.

In July Pope Benedict urged all nations to rebuild their economies in a way that works towards the common good and the real needs of our neighbors. "Every Christian is called to this charity," he states. He challenges business enterprises, governments, unions and individuals to reexamine their economic responsibilities in the light of charity governed by truth. He calls all men and women to think and act anew.

We must heed this call. After all, Jesus did not ask us to think about caring for our neighbor. He called us to act. He said, "Love your neighbor."

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In a few weeks Catholic Charities USA begins our centennial year. We will spend the next 365 days

rallying the nation to rebuild our nation in a way that leaves fewer people behind. We challenge our leaders to muster the same urgency and creativity they brought to the banks' bail out by now addressing the needs of those whom the economic crisis has hit the hardest.

Patching the social safety net is not enough. We must design the 21st century 'New Deal' with new and innovative 21st century solutions. We will pursue solutions through our agencies and in partnership with business and government.

When we succeed in providing for the least among us we benefit all of society. Then when we gather in Washington next September to celebrate our centennial, we truly will be a richer nation.

*Father Larry Snyder is the president of Catholic Charities USA*

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