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USA shouldn't have 'working poor'

by Jerry Filteau

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WASHINGTON ? "The term 'working poor' is no longer acceptable," said Fr. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, at a teleconference launching a national interfaith campaign to promote environmentally green jobs for the poor.

Rabbi Steve Gutow, president of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, said the campaign, Fighting Poverty With Faith, brings together two common concerns of people of all faiths: Care for the poor and care for God's earth.

The coalition seeks to have Congress approve the Gulf Coast Civic Works Act, a bill currently in the House that would create 100,000 green jobs to rebuild America's Gulf Coast communities.

It also seeks Senate passage of the American Clean Energy and Security Act, including House-approved provisions to fund extensive job training in green construction for targeted groups of the poor and unemployed. It wants the Senate version of the bill to go beyond the House version by extending funding for the Green Jobs Act past 2013. The House version allocates about \$860 million a year to the Green Jobs Act, but would extend that funding only up to 2013.

Gutow said a wide range of other organizations and faith groups have joined the JCPA and CCUSA to form "a strong, compassionate voice" for those struggling to make ends meet. Other leading national partners in the coalition include the National Council of Churches and the Islamic Council of North America.

Snyder said, "This partnership represents the type of collaboration that we must all engage in, both at the national and the local level, if we're going to create a movement that will insure that those with the least are considered first and are included in our efforts to insure a life of opportunity and prosperity for all."

Despite their diverse faith backgrounds, he said, members of the Fighting Poverty With Faith coalition "all share the belief that every person deserves a life of dignity and the opportunity to work and to support his or her family. This coalition believes that the United States can and must do better."

Calling "working poor" an unacceptable term, he said, "As the nation shapes our new economy, policies must be in place to insure that everyone who works full time has the means to sustain their family."

Participants in the teleconference included several community leaders who described local efforts to create green jobs and train and hire poor people to take up those jobs.

"I believe education is fundamental" to breaking the cycle of poverty, said Rep. Mike Castle, R-Del., who urged the coalition to support training and retraining of workers to enable them to get sustainable jobs, especially "green jobs in the energy sector" in fields such as wind, solar, fuel cell and biomass energy.

He also asked them to support an extension of emergency unemployment benefits "to help keep families going" as the nation tries to work its way out of the recession and high unemployment.

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This year's Fighting Poverty With Faith campaign, launched Oct. 14, was to culminate Oct. 21 with members calling local, state and federal officials to urge policies supporting green jobs and other measures that protect the environment and help people work their way out of poverty.

The initiative as an interfaith effort was begun last October as an outgrowth of campaigns against poverty launched separately in 2007 by Catholic Charities USA and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs.

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

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