

Catholic Charities lobbies for innovative anti-poverty program

Jerry Filteau | Sep. 29, 2010

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Following the opening liturgy for the Centennial Gathering for Catholic Charities USA, over 1000 representatives from local agencies and partner organizations stand on the steps of McMahon Hall on the Catholic University of America campus in Washington, D.C. Sept. 26. (Photo courtesy Catholic Charities USA.)

WASHINGTON -- Catholic Charities leaders from across the nation flooded the offices of U.S. senators and representatives Sept. 28 to push for a major new U.S. approach to drawing Americans out of poverty.

More than 700 Catholic Charities delegates from nearly all U.S. states swarmed through congressional offices asking members of Congress to become co-sponsors of their National Opportunity and Community Renewal Act, a bill that could transform the way federal, state and local poverty relief programs operate.

The key to transformation would be flexible combining of existing programs, tailored to the specific needs and capacities of clients, to enable them not only to survive in poverty but to lift themselves out of poverty's vicious cycle or downward spiral.

"With this legislation, today we tell the tens of millions of Americans living in poverty that there is a new hope. That they are not destined to live in poverty for their entire lives," said Catholic Charities USA president and CEO, Fr. Larry Snyder.

"With the help of this legislation, people in need will be propelled onto a path of self-sufficiency, enabling them to achieve new legacies of health and happiness for their families," he added.

Sr. Jean Augustine, a Sister of Charity and executive director of Catholic Charities of Gary, Ind., told *NCR* Sept. 28 that earlier that day she and others from her state visited the offices of Indiana Sens. Evan Bayh (D) and Richard Lugar (R). before splitting up to visit the offices of representatives from their own respective congressional districts.

Read more about Sr. Augustine's lobby efforts: [Putting a face on poverty](#) [1].

Noting a recent government report that nearly 44 million Americans now live in poverty, she said, "Catholic Charities represents the face of the poor. We see these statistics every day."

Of the 1,000 Catholic Charities leaders attending that centenary national convention of Catholic Charities USA Sept. 25-28, about 750 stayed on for the final day to lobby for their bill on the Hill and ask their members of Congress to co-sponsor it.

That day Sen. Robert P. Casey, D-Pa., introduced the bill in the Senate and Rep. James McGovern, D-Mass., introduced it in the House.

One key element of the 26-page bill is a plan to update the current service eligibility criteria ? eliminating the approximation of an individual's or family's food budget that was established in the 1960s to determine the poverty line and instead using the American Human Development Index coupled with the Supplemental Poverty Measure currently being developed by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Don Emge of the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Mo., executive director of Catholic Charities of Southern Missouri, told *NCR* he got no promises of sponsorship for the bill, but "the reaction was positive ? The reaction of the staffers and of [Republican] Rep. [Roy] Blunt was that there's some real merit here ? some of the things the proposal speaks about are things that, without having studied the issue, create some real openness on their part.

"Several of them, from different offices, said they were going to go back and study it ? which is all we can ask," he said.

He said that currently across southern Missouri "every community is really pulling together to provide what those agencies [serving the poor] themselves call Ban-aids. We're giving them food, maybe some of them are getting help with their rent payment or the utility payment or something like that. But the agencies themselves say that they're so overwhelmed with the direct service needs that they don't have the time to focus on how do we get people out of poverty."

He said he thinks the legislation proposed by CCUSA will give agencies a chance to make that their focus.

"What is critical here is that the program is not asking for a major influx of funding. What it is asking us to do is to refocus the funds that are already being spent so that we can be wiser. ? It's really about admitting that our current system is broken and that we want to find a more effective way to use the resources we have."

Dennis Walczyk, CEO of Catholic Charities in Buffalo, N.Y., and chairman of the New York State Council of Catholic Charities Directors, told *NCR* that 170 of the 1,000 people attending the CCUSA convention were from New York.

For the lobbying day, he said, they sent about 25 to 30 members of their delegation to meet with senior aides of each of the two New York senators, Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, both Democrats. The New Yorkers broke into smaller groups to meet with the respective members of the House who represented their home areas.

Walczyk said he met with aides to three representatives from the Buffalo area, and one of the legislators, Rep. Louise Slaughter, a Democrat from the 28th District, was present for the meeting in her office.

He told the legislators of a young woman from Puerto Rico who came to Catholic Charities last year for financial assistance and help with medical needs of her children.

"So we helped her out with that and helped get her back on her feet," he said, "and lo and behold, a year later she was hired in our WIC program," the Women, Infants and Children nutrition enhancement program designed to aid pregnant women, babies and children under the age of five.

Walczyk, like others interviewed, said he got no promises from any legislator that they would co-sponsor the National Opportunity and Community Renewal Act ? but with the people he talked to there were "very strong indications they might."

"The reason for that is that it just came out," he said. "So people haven't had a chance to read it, much less digest it. Our goal today was to introduce them to the act, and also give them a general summary of what this hopes to do."

Earl Eichelberger, director of Catholic Charities for the New York State Catholic Conference, said those he visited on the Hill "were receptive" to the bill and he had hopes that the "the whole New York delegation" might get behind it.

"There was no resistance or pushback from any of the staff that we talked to," he said.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR*'s Washington correspondent.]

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