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Catholic Charities aid growing in hard times

Jerry Filteau | Sep. 17, 2009

Eric Waterman stands outside his tent at the Pinellas Hope tent city set up for homeless people in Pinellas Park, Fla., June 7. Pinellas Hope was created by Catholic Charities to provide temporary shelter to more than 250 homeless people, most of whom ha ve been hit by the economic crisis (CNS photo).

ALEXANDRIA, Va.

Catholic Charities agencies that responded to a national survey served more than 8.5 million people last year, said Father Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA.

Addressing journalists at CCUSA offices in Alexandria and Catholic Charities leaders across the country through phone and Web connections, Father Snyder reported a 10 percent increase in clients served by Catholic Charities nationwide in 2008.

He predicted the 2009 level of services would be even higher -- growing unemployment and other major effects of the current recession have placed increased demands since January on the 171 main diocesan Catholic Charities agencies across the country and their 1,668 branches and affiliates.

The 2008 figures only include the first three months after the collapse of Lehman Brothers and near-disintegration of AIG, the Wall Street investment giant bailed out by the government, Father Snyder said. Although the recession was already pretty well entrenched before that, the Lehman and AIG events in September 2008 sealed the recession as the signature economic event of the year.

Catholic Charities president calls for bold measures to address U.S. poverty [1]

?The [unemployment and other poverty] figures for 2009 will be much, much greater,? Snyder said.

He said that at the end of 2008, an estimated 33 million people in the United States were living on income below the official poverty line. Now that figure is probably about 40 million and ?could go as high as 50 million? before an economic turnaround begins to reach the grass roots in the form of more jobs and a rise in other basic economic indicators such as increased production and retail sales.

And the strain on Catholic Charities and other philanthropic agencies to meet those new demands can only grow

as state and local governments ? the main source of the nearly $4 billion in Catholic Charities income last year ? cut funds for the poor in their struggle to balance budgets that have been dramatically reduced by the recession. Two-thirds of the $4 billion in Catholic Charities income in 2008 came from government programs, most of it from state and local governments, according to the report.

Corporate giving, another significant source of support for Catholic Charities activities across the nation, has also declined substantially over the past year as corporations, experiencing major drops in profits because of the recession, have cut back on their philanthropic activities, said Snyder and his senior vice president for development and communications, Patricia Hvidsten.

Snyder said some corporations have introduced ?volunteer days,? asking employees to contribute volunteer hours to community service projects, as a way of making up for their lower financial contributions to local charities.

Hvidsten said a number of corporations have been trying to lessen the impact of their lower financial contributions to charities by other creative programs such as offering discounts to those charities on the purchase of their products.

The national survey, an annual study conducted for CCUSA by the Georgetown University-based Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, received an 85 percent response rate. Projecting from previous data on agencies that did not respond, CARA estimated that Catholic Charities agencies and their affiliates across the nation reached a total of more than 10 million people in need last year.

By far the largest number of people assisted by Catholic Charities were those who received some form of food services ? nearly 6.3 million clients, including almost 3 million who received food from food banks or pantries and more than 2.5 million who were served by soup kitchens or other congregate dining facilities.

Community-building services ? social support, education, health-related services, assistance to at-risk populations, and other socialization and neighborhood services ? reached more than 3.6 million people.

Nearly 600,000 received housing-related services, and almost 1.1 million got assistance in programs designed to strengthen families, such counseling, mental health, immigration, refugee, pregnancy and adoption services.

Other basic needs services, such as clothing, prescription drugs, utilities, or other kinds of emergency financial services, reached more that 1.7 million people, according to the report. Almost 332,000 people got disaster relief from Catholic Charities agencies.

The compartmentalized data add up to far more than the 8.5 million people helped because many of those receiving assistance got more than one form of aid.

The Catholic Charities USA report, released Sept. 15, came on the heels of the yearly federal Census Bureau report Sept. 10 on the economic health of the United States, and a little more than a week before CCUSA?s national convention in Portland, Ore., which marks the start of a year-long series of observances of the organization?s centenary.

The centennial year could be one of the most challenging facing diocesan Catholic Charities agencies across the country since they were founded: massive new demands for service in the face of fewer resources, lower funding and staff cutbacks almost across the board.

The Census Bureau report showed that in the first 12 months of the recession, which officially began in December 2007, the percentage of Americans living in poverty rose from 12.5 percent to 13.2 percent ? the first

major increase since 2004 and the highest level since 1997.

Median household income dropped nearly $2,000 in that single year, from $52,163 to $50,303, and the percentage of Americans without health insurance rose from 15.3 percent in 2007 to 15.4 percent in 2008. The one-year loss in median household income was the largest since the nation began keeping records on that statistic.

Government officials and other commentators have said the federal report, depicting the economic state of the nation only up to last December, is just the tip of the recession?s iceberg, not yet reflecting the harsh economic realities many Americans have started to face since the end of 2008.

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