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Catholic Charities writes, pushes legislation to end poverty

Jerry Filteau | Sep. 27, 2010

Representatives of Catholic Charities programs from across the nation attend the Catholic Charities USA centennial liturgy at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington Sept. 25. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

WASHINGTON ? In an unprecedented action, Catholic Charities USA has drafted federal legislation that would take a new approach to ending poverty in America.

At its centenary convention in Washington CCUSA unveiled its dramatic ? and possibly transformative ? national legislative proposal to change the way federal, state and local governments help poor Americans get out of the vicious cycle of poverty and become self-sufficient and productive.

Some 1,000 Catholic Charities delegates from across the country got first news of the legislative initiative Sept. 26, the second day of their Sept. 25-28 national meeting.

Introduced as a modest national pilot program, it proposes to establish new model experiments in 10 communities around the country in which traditional government anti-poverty programs are replaced by a more flexible and comprehensive approach. At least three of the communities would be rural ? where poverty is even more endemic than in major metropolitan areas ? and at least one would be in an area with a military base, another area of high poverty levels.

If the pilot programs succeed as expected, they could become the first step toward realigning all U.S. antipoverty programs under a new model that focuses more on holistic poverty-exit plans than on program-specific relief of current poverty conditions without a clear overall plan for people to free themselves from the downward spiral of poverty

In the proposed approach, the goal is to get the individual or family back on its own two feet, rather than simply filling the gaps of needs ? food, shelter, etc. ? that drew the individual or family into current welfare or other dependency programs in the first place.

Advocates of the proposed new legislation referred to it as ?silo-busting? ? a reference to many current anti-poverty programs as ?silos? that attack just one aspect of poverty without funding for related conditions that

keep the person or family in poverty.

The CCUSA initiative marks the first time in history that Catholic Charities has initiated legislation, as distinct from supporting or opposing legislation introduced by political parties or other activists on the political scene.

Speakers Sept. 26 described substantive elements of the proposed bill, but they could not comment on many specifics and said they were constrained by the fact that the draft bill had not yet been officially introduced in Congress ? a situation they expected to see changed the next day when the bill was to be assigned a number, which would officially place it before Congress.

On Tuesday, Sept. 28, nearly 1,000 of the Catholic Charities delegates were scheduled to meet on Capitol Hill with their own senators and representatives, or their staffs, to discuss the new bill and urge their members of Congress to cosponsor it.

Candy Hill. CCUSA senior vice president for social policy and government affairs, highlighted the significance of the possible new moment in welfare reform by noting that ?it has been more than 40 years since this country has experienced a truly transformative moment for social change.?

?Now is the time for a new conversation on what it means to live in poverty in the United States in the 21st century,? she said. ?We need to use this economic crisis to create a new economy that does not leave out millions of people.?

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

[**Editor's Note:** An earlier version of this story, misstated Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's role with regard to this bill.]

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