NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Putting a face on poverty

Jerry Filteau | Sep. 29, 2010

WASHINGTON ? When some 700 Catholic Charities leaders from across the country were preparing to visit their senators and representatives Sept. 28 to urge passage of legislation that would take a new approach to poverty, they were told one effective approach is to bring to the meetings a story from their own local experiences. They could put a human face on poverty by showing the legislators how it is affecting some of their own constituents.

Sr. Jean Augustine, a Sister of Charity and executive director of Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Gary, Ind., told *NCR* of the recent story she related in the congressional offices she visited. Here is a transcript of her comments:

> Catholic Charities in Gary has received a grant, through the stimulus money -- which has been very helpful, but it soon will run out ? part of that stimulus money came in the form of what we call HPRP [the Department of Housing and Urban Development?s Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program].
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> As in all of these grants, and I suppose rightly so, there are certain criteria that have to be followed, people have to have eligibility, and you have to verify every bit of eligibility.
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> A week ago, a woman came into our office. She was a young woman, I would say in her 20s, and extremely thin and poorly dressed. She had an appointment to meet with one of our case managers.
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> The case manager was still occupied with another client, so the receptionist told her to just take a seat and wait.
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> She said, ?I?ll go get my family.? She went out and brought back a little boy ? equally poorly dressed and thin ? followed by her husband, a young man, very thin. But it was his whole demeanor, very dejected looking [that struck me]. She said, ?May we use the? ? she said ?bathroom? but it was a lavatory. All three went in.
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> I was so saddened by what I saw. Later in the day, I asked the case manager, ?Were you able to help them??
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> And she said, ?No, Sister. They weren?t eligible.?
>
> ?What?? Impossible!?
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> She said, ?I know. They?re living in their car!?
>
> They were evicted, homeless, and they?re hoping for this aid. I said, ?Well they are certainly eligible.?

She said, ?No. We have to feed into the computer all of the information ? and the computer comes back and tells us they?re not eligible.?

I said, ?But why??

And she said, ?I really don?t know.?

There are formulas [that the computer runs to determine eligibility] and so she said, ?No, we couldn?t help.? She said, ?But we?re going to appeal, and maybe under appeal. ??

That stuck with me, because many people come, they don?t have all of the necessary papers. Many people come to us who have never had to ask before, but come now because of the economic recession, and they don?t know what to do.

And it takes much love and patience to work with them ? and then oftentimes to be disappointed.

That?s one of the things that this [legislative] proposal is going to address ? to eliminate these various silos [separate funding resources that operate under different agencies and different regulations and are not coordinated with one another] and try to develop programs that will not just throw more money at the situation, but have programs designed for local needs.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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