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Catholic volunteers lose AmeriCorps funding

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 21, 2011

The umbrella organization that coordinates the placement of teachers and social workers for Catholic volunteer agencies is losing its AmeriCorps funding next fiscal year, a victim of budget cuts as Washington haggles over how to cut the federal budget to meet deficit reduction targets.

The Catholic Volunteer Network has lost some $5 million, the organization announced earlier this month. For 13 years, the network has administered grants used to help volunteers who teach in Catholic schools and provide social services to the poor.

?Our organization?s mission and outreach initiatives will suffer, but the hardest-hit will be the 1,300 volunteers who would have served as AmeriCorps members at the 900 sites run by our programs in 43 states and the District of Columbia, where volunteers have filled needed roles in schools, soup kitchens and social service agencies,? Jim Lindsay, executive director of the Catholic Volunteer Network, said in a press statement.

The volunteer network helps Catholic organizations like the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Maryknoll Lay Missioners, Cabrini Mission Corps, and Casa Juan Diego, a Catholic Worker in Houston.

The Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that coordinates federal aid to volunteer efforts nationwide, saw its budget cut substantially as a result of budget negotiations for fiscal year 2011.

The proposed House Republican budget would have completely eliminated the Corporation for National and Community Service, but the White House fought to preserve its programs. Its budget was cut by $72 million with AmeriCorps programs being cut by $22.5 million.

The Catholic Volunteer Network was the largest faith-based organization to receive funds from the community service corporation, but the cuts also targeted other organizations such as the Youth Volunteer Corps of America, the Legacy Corps, and Teach for America in South Carolina.

?We received the news a couple of weeks ago and there?s no appeal,? Alyssa Sickle, executive assistant at Catholic Volunteer Network, told *NCR*. ?There will be no funding this year.?

In a letter to John Kelly, the community service corporation?s strategic advisor for faith-based and neighborhood partnerships, Lindsay noted that, in the most recent year, community service corporation grants administered by Catholic Volunteer Network had helped fund 400 teachers, 80 volunteers placed in health centers, 40 placements in nutrition agencies, and 525 volunteers placed in social service agencies.

All told, those volunteers assisted some 1.6 million people, according to Lindsay.

The financial assistance helped those who have recently graduated pay their college loans while working in often underpaid and difficult-to-fill positions.

?Without the Education Award, I am very concerned that many of these competent and dedicated individuals will be unable to serve,? Lindsay wrote. ?The vast majority of our Catholic Volunteer Network volunteers are recent college graduates with staggering student loans. The Education Award has allowed them to serve in record numbers. Further, the AmeriCorps loan forbearance has removed yet another obstacle to their service.?

Catholic Volunteer Network was founded in 1963 in Newark, N.J., and coordinates volunteer activities for some 14,000 volunteers in its member programs in the U.S. as well as in over 100 countries abroad.

A White House official, speaking on background, told *NCR*, ?This is what happens when you just cut and cut in the federal budget. People just see the dollar signs, but these programs help real people.?

The official said that given the current political climate, only a strong response from religious groups like the U.S. bishops? conference could prevent another round of even deeper cuts in next year?s budget.

The roots of AmeriCorps date back to President George H.W. Bush?s ?Thousand Points of Light? initiative, which resulted in the passage of the National Service Act of 1990.

Three years later, President Bill Clinton signed legislation that officially established AmeriCorps. The program had until now received widespread bipartisan support and has worked with organizations like Catholic Volunteer Network to place tens of thousands of volunteers in inner-city and rural schools, social service agencies, and community health centers.

[Michael Sean Winters is an *NCR* contributor based in Washington, D.C.]

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