

## Catholic Charities focuses on life across the human spectrum

Jerry Filteau | Jan. 18, 2012



In February 2011, Jessica Lopez, left, prepares bedding as her fiancé, Deante Brewster, tends to their daughter, Adrianna Brewster, at the Russell Shelter in Santa Rosa, Calif. The shelter for the homeless is funded by Sonoma County and operated by Catholic Charities. (Newscom/ZUMA Press)

WASHINGTON -- Catholic Charities' adoption services -- currently the subject of disputes with several state governments -- and its prenatal services have an obvious connection to the church's pro-life teaching. But the full range of the agency's work nationwide represents pro-life work as well, even if such programs are not usually thought of popularly as part of the political pro-life agenda, the head of Catholic Charities USA said in a recent interview.

To name just a few, such programs can include food pantries and soup kitchens; job training; family counseling; emergency financial assistance for heat, electricity and other needs; shelters for the homeless and battered women; and advocacy for the poor in legislatures and in government agencies.

"I think the work of Catholic Charities actually gives the pro-life teaching and stand of the church credibility, because it's what we say and what we show, by the programs and the actions that we do, that we in fact care not only that this child was conceived -- we care that this child is going to have a healthy, productive life within a family that is caring and loving," said Fr. Larry Snyder, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA. "And so many of our programs actually work to build up those families and to strengthen them, so that in fact children are a real treasure.

"I think sometimes in the United States we say that, but you might be hard-pressed to see it in action," he added. "But I think that's one of the things that Catholic Charities and the church do. ... We not only say that children are a treasure, but we try to assure that that is the case, through all kinds of programs that we offer."

"Adoption and prenatal services across the country" have long been a hallmark of Catholic Charities' activities, Snyder said. "Of course the number of adoptions has fallen dramatically in the last 20 years or so, but we still do adoptions," although they are no longer as big a part of the Catholic Charities mission.

He noted that Catholic Charities USA, a national office for some 1,700 Catholic Charities agencies across the country, recently launched a Web-based national adoption service, still in development, in which all Catholic

Charities agencies are starting to come together to promote and facilitate adoption services.

The website ([www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/page.aspx?pid=1670](http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/page.aspx?pid=1670)) offers information and guidance to prospective adoptive parents and to pregnant women who are considering the option of giving up their baby for adoption.

"It's kind of an exciting thing that takes us kind of to a new level in our adoption offerings," Snyder said.

In another clearly pro-life area, Snyder said 10 diocesan Catholic Charities around the country are among primary local handlers of the Women, Infants and Children program.

WIC is a federal program of grants -- administered by each state but often operated in service centers around the state by faith-based or other nonprofits -- to provide supplemental food, health care referrals and nutritional information to low-income women during pregnancy and after birth and to infants and children up to five years of age who are at nutritional risk.

Snyder cited Catholic Charities of the Chicago archdiocese, which operates 16 WIC centers across the archdiocese, as one of the largest programs in the country.

In most dioceses, where other nonprofit agencies or the local government are the primary WIC operators, Catholic Charities offices work in close collaboration with them, he said.

In another area of support for the unborn and infants, he said, "we certainly provide housing for women who are in a crisis pregnancy. A lot of that is done on a diocesan basis, but Catholic Charities does it community-wide as well."

On a broader level, "aside from the federal government, Catholic agencies across this country are the largest provider of housing" to those in need, he added.

Snyder called recent conflicts in some states between Catholic Charities and state governments over adoption or foster care rules "a rather troubling development."

In 2010 the Washington archdiocese gave up its adoption and foster care programs because a new District of Columbia law would have required it to give equal consideration to same-sex couples seeking to adopt or give foster care to a child. Four years earlier the Boston archdiocese ended its adoption programs for the same reason.

Just recently dioceses in Illinois terminated their state-funded adoption and foster care programs after the state legalized same-sex unions and a court decision said agencies receiving funding from the state could not discriminate against same-sex couples as prospective temporary or permanent parents in adoption and foster care.

Snyder described those conflicts as basically "a clash of civil rights and religious liberties" that is "driven by states that recognize gay marriage." He said it is not unlike the forced withdrawal of some Catholic Charities agencies in the 1980s from programs for people with AIDS when government agencies required nonprofits engaged in treatment or support of HIV-AIDS clientele to provide condoms to clients as part of their program.

When a church agency must relinquish its faith convictions in order to participate in a publicly funded program, its only choice is to withdraw from the program, he said.

"Sometimes people get confused about the contracts that Catholic Charities programs have with the government, and sometimes I hear people say, 'Well, you're forced to do things that are against the church's teaching,'" he said. "Well, when you look at the whole nature of a contract, it is that both parties have to agree

to this. One party cannot force it on another. And so in our history before we have seen program areas where Catholic Charities have had to give up certain programs because the demands of the state were in conflict with our religion.?

Snyder was head of Catholic Charities in St. Paul-Minneapolis before he became president of the national organization in 2005. Shortly thereafter, in February 2007, he launched an ambitious program to reform public welfare policy and cut American poverty in half by the year 2020.

In 2010 Catholic Charities USA drafted legislation -- the National Opportunity and Community Renewal Act -- introduced in Congress as bills by Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., and Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., that would set up pilot programs to demonstrate more effective government approaches to combating poverty.

In a phone interview Snyder acknowledged that in the current crisis mode of congressional activity, the Catholic Charities legislation is on a far back burner.

?Right now is probably not a good time to be trying to promote any social welfare or social change program, because of the deadlock that?s there and the fact that people are not working together,? he said. ?But that doesn?t deter us. We still keep the message before Congress that in fact there are difficult budgetary and economic choices that have to be made, but they cannot be made on the backs of the poor, that we have an obligation to ensure the welfare of those who are least among us -- and that if we?re looking for economic solutions to the current problems that we have, we have to look somewhere else [than cutting programs for the poor].?

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent. His email address is [jfilteau@ncronline.org](mailto:jfilteau@ncronline.org).]

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