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Chicago charities work to fill gap left by loss of bishops' funding

Brian Roewe | Sep. 26, 2013

Chicago community organizations affiliated with an immigration reform group that came out last spring in support of same-sex marriage expect to lose funding from a church-based program, and area charities are trying to fill that gap.

A network of charitable foundations has formed the Solidarity Fund as a way to provide financial support for nearly a dozen organizations at risk of losing grants from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, a program of the U.S. bishops' conference whose grants are approved by the local diocese -- in this case, the Chicago archdiocese.

Contributing members to the Solidarity Fund include the Alphawood Foundation, the Chicago Foundation for Women, the Crossroads Fund, the Gill Foundation (based in Denver) and the Pierce Family Foundation. They have set a goal of raising $300,000 by the end of the year and encourage other foundations as well as individuals to contribute.

"We thought that was great. We really need it," Leone Jose Bicchieri, executive director of the Chicago Workers' Collaborative, said of the Solidarity Fund, whose creation was announced Wednesday.

The collaborative works primarily with immigrants and African-Americans in Chicago's temporary labor sector. Its worker centers provide education on workers' rights and programs to break down racial divisions and advocate for better labor standards. For more than a decade, it received funding from the bishops' human development program and projected its grants would represent 10 percent to 15 percent of its budget for the next three years.

The need for emergency funding stemmed from ties several CCHD-funded groups had with the Illinois Coalition for Immigrants and Refugee Rights. The coalition's primary focus is advocating for and working with immigrant and refugee communities, but on May 23, it released a statement endorsing marriage equality.

"While we recognize that there are differences of opinion within immigrant and faith-based communities regarding same-sex marriages, including among our members, the majority of our members -- and therefore our organization -- believe that a full respect for our state's and our nation's diversity demands that we not discriminate based on whom we love, and that we call upon an end to such discrimination in our local, state, and federal laws," read the statement issued by the coalition, which represents more than 130 organizations.

In early June, the Chicago *Sun-Times* reported [1] that church officials had contacted grant recipients affiliated with coalition, asking them to cut ties with the immigration and refugee coalition or lose funding. The *Sun-Times* reported that only organizations seeking grants for 2013-2014 were in jeopardy.

A month later, a group of Chicago Catholics wrote an open letter in the *Chicago Tribune* to Cardinal Francis George, accusing him of using immigrants "as pawns in a political battle," and urged him to reconsider rescinding the groups' funding.

A day later, George responded that the board of the immigrant and refugee coalition, not he, cut the funding by endorsing same-sex marriage and said the church continues to support immigrants and immigration reform through other organizations.

For the Chicago Workers' Collaborative, Bicchieri said the archdiocese contacted him several times in an effort to find a solution, but ultimately, he and his staff determined, given their focus, it didn't make sense for their organization to sever ties with coalition.

"We felt that now was not a time to even consider splintering off from a coalition around immigration reform," he told *NCR*, adding that he was hopeful for future opportunities for collaboration with the Chicago archdiocese.

Jeanne Kracher, executive director of the Crossroads Fund, said when news broke that the organizations could lose their CCHD funding, people in the funding community began talking about a way to assist the groups "who have had a long history of doing very good work in the community."

A number of the organizations had in the past worked and supported several of the groups, Kracher said, and were familiar with their contribution to the city, especially in areas of Chicago with large immigrant populations and those on lower economic rungs.

"They have very solid track records, perform important functions and services to community groups all over the city," she said.

For now, managers of the fund are focusing their attention on providing support through the end of the year and have not considered whether to continue beyond that.

"We're concerned that suddenly they're defunded and that's just a huge hit that they take to their projects, so we're hoping to be able to fill that gap," she said.

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