News

A case worker with Catholic Charities of Acadiana is pictured in a file photo preparing a bed at St. Joseph Shelter, an emergency shelter that cares for 87 individuals experiencing homelessness in and around Lafayette, Louisiana. (OSV News/Courtesy of Catholic Charities of Acadiana/Jason Cohen)

Kate Scanlon

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Editor's note: *This story has been updated throughout with new information and reactions.*

Drastic cuts in state funding for a Catholic Charities' homeless shelter operations in Louisiana over the wider Catholic Church's ministry to migrants have dealt a significant blow to the church's ability to care for area residents experiencing homelessness, including veterans.

Republican Gov. Jeff Landry vetoed $1 million in state funds June 24 for emergency homeless shelter services run by Catholic Charities of Acadiana. Landry later cited the wider work of Catholic Charities, the domestic charitable arm of the Catholic Church in the U.S., in serving migrants as his reason; however, the line item veto financially gutted homeless services by Catholic Charities overwhelmingly serving native Louisianans.

The June 24 line item veto also struck funding for other organizations, including $1 million for the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.

Catholic Charities of Acadiana had requested the state funding to support its overall emergency shelter operations in Lafayette, which include programs for families and individuals, as well as an outreach for veterans that is operated in conjunction with the Alexandria Veterans Administration Medical Center.

In a statement provided to local media outlet KATC, Landry, a Catholic, did not specify the work of Catholic Charities of Acadiana; however, he made a general accusation that Catholic Charities — the domestic charitable organization is ultimately under the authority of the Catholic Church's bishops — supports illegal immigration, a charge the church's leaders have vigorously denied.

"As you can see from their website, part of Catholic Charities' mission is to support the influx of illegal aliens into our country. Taxpayers should never foot the bill for

nonprofits who are contributing to the illegal immigration crisis our nation is facing," Landry stated.

But Lafayette Bishop J. Douglas Deshotel told local News 15 that Landry's veto nixed money for "really the only shelter in town" that is serving the Acadiana region's own homeless "with some amount of decency and human dignity" during cold winters and scorching summers. He argued the church's ministry to help people in need overall is getting associated with and scapegoated for the nation's legislative failures to address immigration.

Deshotel said that Landry has been an ally in the "respect life field," which he said should also extend to caring for people who are homeless and hungry.

"I'm glad he's a Catholic," he said. "But as Catholics, you know, we also have a social dimension that we're called to follow the Gospel and care for those who are in need. I mean Matthew 25: ... 'As often as you did it for the least of my brethren you did it for me.' That's, you know, part of our Catholic social teaching: that we care for those who are in need, especially right around in our neighborhood and in our community. Catholic Charities does that."

Catholic Charities of Acadiana, which is part of the Lafayette Diocese, said in a statement to OSV News that it was "deeply saddened" by the veto of the funding, which "will have a crippling impact" on the agency's "ability to sustain shelter services" over the coming fiscal year, which began July 1.

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"The vetoed shelter appropriations are a significant setback to our pro-life efforts to care for our vulnerable neighbors experiencing homelessness," said CEO Kim Boudreaux. "Our shelter serves as a critical lifeline for 87 individuals each night who have nowhere else to turn. We face an uncertain future for those who seek shelter with us as a last resort."

In its statement, the agency said it had sheltered 410 specific individuals in its emergency shelter. Of those, 81% originated from the surrounding Acadiana region, 10% originated from a different part of Louisiana and 9% originated from out of state.

The agency also noted that prior to admitting an individual into the shelter program, an assessment is conducted to determine "the possibility of reconnecting the person with their natural supports because of the traumatic nature of an experience of homelessness."

"Last year, Catholic Charities of Acadiana successfully diverted 60 households from an experience of homelessness by helping to reconnect them to natural support systems," the agency noted in its statement. "Also last year, Catholic Charities of Acadiana returned 135 individuals from its shelter to permanent housing."

The agency said in its statement that it urgently advocates for an allocation of local, state and federal funding to be adequately appropriated to address the root causes of homelessness, the critical basic needs of Lafayette's homeless population (such as shelter and food), and an investment in evidence-based solutions to transition those experiencing homelessness to affordable and stable housing with appropriate community-based supports.

Regarding its immigration services, the agency states on its website that it "provides low-cost legal aid services to immigrants, and newcomers to this country, all within the confines of the law."

"These services allow clients an opportunity to contribute and participate more fully in our communities," the website states, and lists legal forms the agency provides migrants assistance with, including Temporary Protected Status and work authorization forms.

"We affirm the inherent dignity bestowed by God on every human person, including immigrants and refugees, no matter the circumstances that compel a person to begin a new life in our community," the website states.

Landry's move comes as some elected officials have grown increasingly hostile toward nongovernmental organizations, particularly Catholic Charities and other Catholic ministries, that provide resources such as food and shelter to migrants, including those at the U.S.-Mexico border.

In July, a state judge denied Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's effort to shut down Annunciation House in El Paso, Texas, a Catholic nonprofit serving migrants in obedience to the Gospel. The judge found that Paxton's office "failed to establish probable grounds for the proceedings" and violated the Texas Religious Freedom

Restoration Act.

But the bishops have also increasingly made clear — as hostility toward the church's ministry to migrants continues to mount from social and political quarters — that attempts to intimidate the church from carrying out its mission to migrants impact the church's religious freedom.

In February, Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee for Religious Liberty, issued a statement expressing solidarity with faith-driven ministries to migrants, underscoring how the church's religious freedom is essential in this area.

At a June 13 press conference at the U.S. bishops' spring general meeting, Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and El Paso Bishop Mark Seitz, the conference's chair on migration, said the church would not back down from its obligation from Jesus Christ to care for migrants and refugees.

"Primarily, we have to respond to the mandate of the Gospel, which is that a stranger must see the face of Christ," said the archbishop, who heads the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services, in response to a question posed by OSV News. "And if that liberty is restricted — we obviously want to respect the law — but if that liberty is restricted, then yes, our religious liberty is being restricted, because we can't put into practice the precepts of the Gospel."