Image not found
http://ncronline.org/sites/all/themes/ncr_awesomeness/images/logo.png
National Catholic Reporter
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://ncronline.org)

Charities prepare to mitigate impact of federal government shutdown

Maria-Pia Negro Catholic News Service | Oct. 8, 2013
Arlington, Va.

Catholic charities and churches across the Arlington diocese in northern Virginia have been looking at how to lessen the impact of the government shutdown on the community.

In response to the government freeze, Arlington diocesan Catholic Charities was giving nonperishable food to families affected by the shutdown through food pantries in Alexandria and Leesburg.

"We have plenty of supplies, but we don't know the kind of response we are going to get," said Sally O'Dwyer, Catholic Charities vice president for community service. "We will give until we have no more."

Monday marked the seventh day of the partial federal shutdown over a congressional budget impasse, causing federal agencies to furlough roughly 800,000 employees -- many of whom have already filed unemployment claims. The 1.3 million civilian federal employees still working might see their paychecks delayed if the shutdown extends.

In the long run, this could increase requests for financial assistance if people are struggling to pay their bills. Emergency assistance coordinators said it was still too early to see how many people will need help as a result of the shutdown.

Francia Salguero, director of Francis House, an outreach center owned by St. Francis of Assisi Church in Triangle, said people who may need help with rent and utilities won't seek them until the end of October. "They have to wait until they are behind on their bills to contact us," Salguero told the *Arlington Catholic Herald*, the diocesan newspaper.

Other programs offering financial assistance for low-income families had yet to feel the impact of the shutdown on those they serve. That may change as time goes by, O'Dwyer said.

"The (Catholic Charities) Emergency Assistance offices have not seen a discernible effect so far," O'Dwyer said. "But if this stretches out, we could see a greater demand."

With no end in sight for the shutdown, some parishes were preparing to help those already struggling to make ends meet and those relying on federal programs or state programs funded with federal money.

Carol Mayfield, food pantry coordinator at St. Mary of Sorrows Church in Fairfax, said she planned to urge pantry volunteers to send some of their own supplies to pantries at risk of running out of food.

"So far we have not received an unusual number of calls from families," she said. "But we want to make sure we distribute our food where it is most needed -- while keeping enough for ourselves."

Virginia's health commissioner, Dr. Cynthia C. Romero, said Oct. 4 that despite the shutdown, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, known as WIC, would remain open for at least a month. This came as a relief to many as it had been speculated that the program, which gives vouchers for baby formula and food to about 9 million women and children nationwide, could close some of its offices

after a week.

"All local WIC offices are currently open and are continuing to provide vital services to the families and individuals who depend on them in the commonwealth," Romero said. "We are watching budgets closely in hopes of extending WIC services as long as possible during these uncertain times."

The program is using rebates from Virginia's infant formula contract, reimbursement from Medicaid and money from a U.S. Department of Agriculture emergency contingency fund to keep local offices running until at least Nov. 1.

If the shutdown lasts less than a month, local social services programs won't face any problems, said Joron Moore-Planter, spokeswoman for the Virginia Department of Social Services.

"However, should this shutdown last for more than 30 days, some programs considered to be 'discretionary' in the federal budget could be impacted," Moore-Planter said in a news release.

This could affect programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Energy Assistance and Childcare.

Programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, formally known as food stamps, and public school lunches and breakfast will continue even after 30 days, Moore-Planter said.

Smaller nutrition programs that receive government grants may have to close sooner. If that happens, people in need might turn to other nonprofits for help. Feeding extra people might become challenging for many of the emergency pantries receiving commodity food from the government.

Many of these supplies were destined to those households that did not qualify for benefits but still needed help to feed their family.

[Maria-Pia Negro is on the staff of the *Arlington Catholic Herald*, newspaper of the diocese of Arlington, Va.]

Source URL (retrieved on *2016-05-31 18:57*): https://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/charities-prepare-mitigate-impact-federal-government-shutdown