

Catholic Charities affiliates in Baltimore and elsewhere aid in job creation, placement

WASHINGTON – Catholic Charities USA and its many U.S. diocesan-based affiliates have long been known as social service providers. But they’ve also been part of the job-creation movement, even in the midst of tough economic times, and even for some of the hardest-to-place job seekers.

Catholic Charities leaders detailed some of their initiatives at the Capitol during an April 20 congressional briefing on job creation and innovative workforce policies.

In Cleveland, Catholic Charities conducts job training for felons. In Chicago, a food-service program instituted by the Catholic Charities affiliate there has an 85 percent job-retention rate, impressive given the turnover in the food-service industry.

In Baltimore, Catholic Charities expanded a feeding program into a multi-point service program that each year pulls hundreds of poor Baltimoreans out of the ranks of the jobless.

Still, more could be done with congressional action, said Father Larry Snyder, president and chief executive of Catholic Charities USA.

“The (economic) recovery must be an inclusive recovery and we are here today to discuss the absolute necessity of job creation and job stability as the foundation that must exist in order for this to happen,” he said.

Father Snyder cited specific steps Congress could take to prevent what he called a “jobless recovery.”

In the short term, he said, Congress should:

- Extend unemployment benefits and COBRA health care coverage to those out of a job who are eligible.

- Expand job training opportunities, including on-the-job training; summer jobs for youth - the unemployment rate for youths ages 16-24 is nearly 20 percent more than twice the national overall jobless rate; subsidized job programs for recipients of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families funds; and efforts to create local infrastructure jobs.

One bill already in the congressional pipeline would extend unemployment insurance and COBRA for one year; on April 15, President Barack Obama signed into law a 60-day extension of jobless benefits. Other bills would fund youth employment, create a TANF emergency contingency fund; and create local infrastructure jobs through the Local Jobs for America Act.

Longer-term solutions advanced by Father Snyder included TANF reauthorization and reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act.

Vanessa Lee, director of Catholic Charities Community Services employment and training programs in the Diocese of Cleveland, said her six-year-old program got its start after a newly released woman felon bitterly asked, "Do you have any jobs for ex-offenders?"

The program boasts a 77 percent job-placement rate, a 73 percent job-retention rate after the first 90 days of employment, and a 68 percent retention rate after the first 180 days.

But with the current economic slump, Lee said, it's been harder to place her candidates in jobs. Cleveland's unemployment rate, she added, was 11 percent, and twice that for African-American men.

In Baltimore, the placement numbers are likewise slack in this slack economy. Mary Anne O'Donnell, director of the community services division of Catholic Charities of Baltimore, said that they expect to be able to place about 400 people who have gone through its Christopher House Employment Agency program in jobs - about half that of last year.

But the agency, part of the Our Daily Bread Employment Center, a combination soup kitchen and job-training complex run by Catholic Charities, boasts a 95 percent job-

placement rate, O'Donnell said.

It's not easy, though. "Our Daily Bread Employment Center costs \$3 million a year," O'Donnell said.

In Chicago, one sole recovering addict used to make box lunches for schoolchildren.

Now, the Lunch-n-More Food Service Program run by Catholic Charities employs 125 people preparing 2,000 meals each day for kids, and another 10,000 meals for seniors, according to Angel Gutierrez. He is vice president of community development and outreach service for Catholic Charities' Chicago archdiocesan affiliate of the Archdiocese of Chicago. And at-risk youths are hired when the feeding program expands in the summer.

The local Catholic Charities leaders said they had to cobble together government and private grants to sustain their programs, even after their worth has been demonstrated. With the multiple-source grants comes multiple-source evaluations to justify continued funding, which O'Donnell complained "drowns us in paperwork," adding that federal agencies could better coordinate their grant distribution.