

CCHD adopts stronger policy to ensure funds used match church teaching

WASHINGTON - Under persistent criticism from a small but vocal group of activists as well as questions from some bishops, leaders of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development have established “stronger policies and clearer mechanisms” to guide how grants are awarded to poverty-fighting groups and strengthen oversight of how funds are spent.

Made public Oct. 26, the plan places greater emphasis on the Catholic identity of the 41-year-old program and renews the U.S. bishops’ commitment to fight poverty in all its forms, said Bishop Roger P. Morin of Biloxi, Miss., chairman of the bishops’ CCHD subcommittee.

“There were those who were concerned that renewal in some way might mean moving away from a priority of helping the poor achieve greater self-sufficiency. There is a reaffirmation that the CCHD will continue to have a priority for the poor and in helping the poor to help themselves. That has not changed,” Bishop Morin told Catholic News Service.

“For CCHD, its focus always was on poverty and trying to always find the best method of dynamics or organizations to address poverty at the local level,” he said.

A 15-page document outlining the changes, “The Review and Renewal of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development,” provides a “road map for the renewal” of the program.

It includes 10 commitments under which the program will operate.

“These 10 commitments are neither an abandonment of CCHD’s foundations nor are they an effort to repackage ‘business as usual,’” the document states.

The effort also aligns itself with the five priorities the bishops established for

2008-2011. CCHD goals, according to the document, most closely match three of the priorities: emphasizing the life and dignity of the human person, recognizing cultural diversity and strengthening marriage and family life.

John Carr, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, said broader Catholic participation in the program is expected under the plan. Traditionally, CCHD has funded neighborhood and community organizations, not all of which were Catholic or had formal Catholic participation.

"It will be a plus for an application that has Catholic parishes and institutions," Carr said. "(It's) not a requirement, but it is a plus. It weighs favorably. The truth is the majority of our projects have substantial Catholic involvement. But we're going to encourage and reward Catholic participation."

CCHD has been under fire since 2008 from critics who claim the program has lost its way by funding organizations that joined coalitions taking positions contrary to Catholic teaching on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

In recent years, at least eight bishops have decided not to participate in the annual collection, citing questions about the activities of groups being funded.

The criticisms were the most recent the program has faced. CCHD's emphasis on funding programs that empower poor and low-income people largely through community organizing activities has been the target of critics almost since the program started in 1969.

Bishop Morin said five of the 270 organizations funded in the 2008-2009 grant cycle lost their awards for violating grant guidelines. He apologized to donors - people in the pews - for the program's lapses.

"This is not a perfect world or a perfect organization," he told CNS. "We can only do our best to continue the process with the benefit of finding out where there is failure. Where there is failure there is the opportunity to build something better."

Bishop Morin said the review allowed CCHD officials to recommit to the program's founding principles, including its Gospel-based mission of seeking justice rooted in Catholic social teaching and faithful stewardship of human, financial and

institutional resources. Some of those efforts will include community organizing activities to find solutions to common problems, such as getting a fire hydrant fixed in an inner-city neighborhood or improving access to quality education for poor children, he said.

“I don’t think there is anything wrong to get the government to assume its legislative responsibility of the well-being of the people. In order to do that, you have to be organized,” he said.

Ten months in the making, the review and renewal document was approved by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ administrative committee in September. It will be presented to the entire body of bishops during the conference’s semi-annual meeting Nov. 15-18 in Baltimore.

The first listed commitment encompasses the program’s Catholic identity and promises to “emphasize the principles of Catholic social and moral teaching in all CCHD materials and communications.”

The plan calls for CCHD staff responsibilities to be reassigned so that one person will “focus on promoting, safeguarding and monitoring the Catholic identity of CCHD” and checking on the work of funded agencies.

Other commitments include steps to:

- Bring in at least one moral theologian as consultant on the application of Catholic moral teaching on collaboration and cooperation.
- Establish a review board to hear complaints about the activities of funded organizations and decide if a grant should be withdrawn.
- Redesign grant applications so that they include an explanation that CCHD’s mission is based on Catholic social and moral teaching.
- Start a national strategic grant program to “address emerging challenges,” paid for with funds set aside from the national CCHD collection, which is usually taken up in parishes on the weekend before the beginning of Advent.

An example of such a grant is the \$300,000 awarded to organizations giving voice to the fishermen and communities affected by the Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

Other commitments stress the program's priority for the poor, improving communication about the accomplishments of CCHD-funded programs in local dioceses, strengthening partnerships between the national office in Washington and local dioceses and addressing moral issues related to poverty.

The full text of "The Review and Renewal of The Catholic Campaign for Human Development" will be published in the Nov. 4 issue of Origins. It is also available at www.usccb.org/cchd/.