

Faith groups press for congressional action to cut poverty

WASHINGTON - An interfaith group of more than 50 members three years ago pledged to join in an effort to cut U.S. poverty in half by 2020.

In that time, the ranks of American poor have only risen. The latest Census Bureau estimates that 44 million Americans are in poverty, including one in five children.

Members of the interfaith group, Fighting Poverty With Faith, urged the House to pass the Improving Nutrition for America's Children Act during the House's lame-duck session after Thanksgiving. The companion bill in the Senate already has been approved by the upper chamber.

The bill would make free and reduced-price meals more accessible to children from low-income families during the summer months, when they are not in school to receive such meals there.

Currently, about 20 million children receive free or reduced-price breakfasts and lunches at school during the school year. But during the summer months, the number drops sharply to 3.3 million, according to Kevin Concannon, Agriculture Department undersecretary for food, nutrition and consumer services.

"You don't have to be a mathematician to know we have a very serious problem here," Concannon said.

"While crisis presents challenges, it also presents opportunities," said Candy Hill, senior vice president for social policy and government affairs for Catholic Charities USA, one of five Catholic organizations that are part of Fighting Poverty With Faith. She noted that each of the umbrella group's 52 members are "working through their own networks to cut poverty."

Catholic Charities USA has been working for several years on its Campaign to Reduce Poverty in America.

Catholic Charities in Chicago provided 273,000 more meals this past summer than it did in the summer of 2009, noted Max Finberg, director of the USDA Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

Speaking during a Nov. 22 news conference inside a Senate office building, Finberg said, "It's nice that the fellows behind us in the Capitol are beginning to pay attention to this (bill)."

Some of its other provisions include expanding the access of low-income rural areas to the summer food service program, and requiring school lunch and breakfast programs to establish local school wellness policies for their schools that include goals for nutrition promotion and education, physical activity and education, and other school-based activities that promote student wellness.

"The great thing is that the president of the United States got this as well," Finberg said. President Barack Obama has said he, too, is committed to cutting U.S. poverty in half by 2020.

When an economy is in upheaval, "it falls disproportionately on poor people," Concannon said. However, with poverty-fighting measures such as the nutrition bill, "we certainly have the capacity to redirect" poverty, he added. "We should have the will to do it."

In addition to working to get the nutrition bill passed, Finberg said, advocates also should fight to give greater access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program - formerly known as food stamps - to eligible people. Currently, about one-third of those eligible do not receive the assistance. Finberg also encouraged outreach by churches to other denominations to devise joint approaches to combating poverty.

The other Catholic organizations belonging to Fighting Poverty With Faith are the Center of Concern, the National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, the Institute Justice Team of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and the Catholic social justice lobby called Network.