

Maine organization loses CCHD funds over support for same-sex marriage

WASHINGTON – A Maine social service center that runs an advocacy program for homeless people has been asked to return \$17,400 in Catholic Campaign for Human Development funding because of its support for same-sex marriage.

Preble Street Resource Center in Portland, Maine, violated the funding contract for its Homeless Voice for Justice advocacy program by joining a 2009 campaign that urged voters to defeat a ballot measure calling for the repeal of the state's same-sex marriage law, Ralph McCloud, CCHD executive director, told Catholic News Service.

Maine voters supported the initiative in the November election, overturning a same-sex marriage law passed by the Maine Legislature in 2009.

CCHD learned about Preble Street's stance on the issue in November and followed up with an investigation, McCloud said.

The agency in January was asked to return funds given to Homeless Voice for Justice. Preble Street received \$15,000 from the national CCHD office and an additional \$2,400 in local CCHD funding from the Portland Diocese.

The amount from the national grant represented half of the \$30,000 Homeless Voice for Justice was to receive in fiscal year 2010. The other half was to be distributed in the first half of 2010.

The organization also forfeited \$33,000 in funding for fiscal year 2011, McCloud said.

Sue Bernard, director of communications for the Portland Diocese, said Preble Street returned the local grant in January. As of March 31, funding under the national grant had not been returned, McCloud said.

“When we take up this collection once a year, the donors are under the understanding that this money will be used for projects that don’t violate Catholic values,” Bernard said. “We have to make sure the money is expended in the same way.

“It’s very unfortunate. We think this work is worthwhile or we would have never funded it in the first place,” she said.

The organization has received CCHD funding since 2001, according to CCHD records. Until 2009, no questions arose about its compliance with Catholic teaching , McCloud said.

Mark Swann, Preble Street’s executive director, could not be reached for comment.

Applicants for CCHD funding are asked a series of questions related to Catholic teaching and are told that if they are not in compliance they are ineligible for funding.

McCloud said Preble Street indicated it did not promote or advocate same-sex marriage at the time the application was filed.

Meanwhile, in the Diocese of Green Bay, Wis., Bishop David L. Ricken has formed a task force to study the diocese’s support of CCHD, according spokeswoman Leah Gabrielson.

The task force evolved from a March 24 meeting Bishop Ricken had with representatives of two CCHD-funded faith-based organizing groups in the Green Bay Diocese.

In February, Bishop Ricken announced that he decided to drop CCHD from the diocese’s annual World’s Poor collection, traditionally taken on the fourth Sunday of Lent. The 2010 collection occurred at Masses March 10-11.

At the time, Father John Doerfler, vicar general and chancellor for the diocese, told The Compass, newspaper of the Green Bay Diocese, that the bishop had “some questions about programs that have received funding from CCHD.”

“That, along with the enormous post-earthquake needs in Haiti, we decided this is an appropriate time to give additional support to Catholic Relief Services while we analyze the situation with CCHD,” he said.

Questions about two faith-based organizing groups – known as JOSHUA and ESTHER and whose memberships include Catholic parishes – were raised in November about their connection with the Chicago-based Gamaliel Foundation. Critics contended the foundation was part of the Health Care for America Now, which supported public funding of abortion in any health care reform legislation.

However, Ana Garcia-Ashley, Gamaliel’s associate director, told CNS March 31 that the foundation severed ties with the health care group as soon as it learned of its stance.

“The minute HCAN started promoting something we do not believe in, we disassociated from them,” Garcia-Ashley said. “We were look for health care for all. We were not looking for public funding of abortion.

She said the foundation, established in 1968, takes its name from the Pharisee identified in the Book of Acts who protected a group of early Christians from death at the hands of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council.

“We understand 129 years of Catholic social teaching,” she explained. “We understand the Catholic position. We understand the world we are being called to build.”

Bishop Ricken met March 24 with about 60 members of JOSHUA, which stands for Justice Organization Sharing Hope and United for Action, and ESTHER, or Empowerment, Solidarity, Truth, Hope, Equality, Reform, to discuss his concerns and to listen to them explain how they approach organizing around social justice issues.

“As the shepherd of 350,000 Catholics in northeastern Wisconsin, I want to strive for clarity in what we do,” Bishop Ricken told the groups, according to a report in The Compass. “I want the Catholic faithful to know where the church stands on pertinent political issues.”

Gabrielson was unaware of a time line for the task force's work.