

New Jersey bishops call for ‘action agenda’ to address rising poverty

TRENTON, N.J. – Poor people in New Jersey number in the hundreds of thousands and yet “they are often invisible to us,” said the state’s Catholic bishops in a Nov. 21 statement on the growing rate of poverty.

“As the plight of these, our brothers and sisters, continues to spiral downward, we cannot stand by in silence,” they said. “We cannot ignore children who go to bed hungry, parents who are jobless, families who are homeless, the sick who suffer without medical care, or the elderly who live in infested or unsafe housing.

“We ... call upon all people of good will to address the critical needs of the poor who live among us. We must remember that the moral worth of a society is measured primarily by how justly it responds to the most vulnerable,” the bishops said.

Individual efforts to help the poor are “a critical starting point and even can be noble and lifesaving,” but more is needed, they said, and called for an “‘agenda for action’ by individuals, churches, synagogues, mosques, government and the private sector.”

To that end, the bishops announced the New Jersey Catholic Conference, with cooperation from Catholic Charities agencies, will convene four task forces to help develop that agenda by focusing on “critical issues impacting poverty: the weakening of family life, failing education systems, unemployment and low-paying jobs, and unavailable affordable housing.”

“The goal will be to identify pragmatic recommendations to help strengthen families, improve schools, reduce unemployment, assure living wages and increase affordable housing,” the bishops explained.

They will put together an advisory council of community leaders to oversee the initiative.

Citing national and state statistics on population, labor and the economy, the bishops noted that the latest figure from the U.S. Census Bureau, released Nov. 11, shows that more than 49 million Americans, or 16 percent of the total population, live in poverty.

The Census Bureau said it arrived at the new figure by using a broader formula to calculate data released in September, which said 46.2 million people were living in poverty, or 15.1 percent.

In New Jersey, “a state that is frequently ranked as the second- or third-richest state in the country,” the bishops said that more than 799,000 residents “had incomes lower than the official poverty rate - incomes so low that they were unable to make ends meet and required food stamps to survive.” The state figures were for 2009, the latest available.

“Poverty has many faces - the young and old, the professional and nonprofessional, the educated and uneducated, the native born and the immigrant, and those with or without a religious faith,” the bishops said, noting that poor people live in cities, suburbs and rural areas and may even be one’s next-door neighbor.

“The poor are not a static socioeconomic group. Many people who were once self-sufficient now find themselves on the edge of poverty because of a life-changing event,” they said. Catholic Charities agencies are reporting that some people who were once donors “are now clients in need of services.”

Catholic social teaching calls for providing direct services to those in need and also addressing inequities in society by advocating for “fair public policies” for housing, health care and education, the bishops said.

“Scripture calls us to act with courage, generosity, justice and love. If we fail to act, our faith commitment rings hollow,” they said.

“Empathy, alone, does not help the poor. We need a firm societal commitment to action - a grass-roots movement that begins with individuals, and then expands to family, community and government,” the bishops said.

The full statement by New Jersey’s Catholic bishops can be found online at diometuchen.org/media/files/communications/Statement_%20on_Poverty_by_NJ_Catholic_Bishops.pdf.