

Organization to distribute \$1 million in grants to retired religious

WASHINGTON - Support Our Aging Religious, a national organization working to help U.S. religious congregations finance the retirement of their elderly and infirm members, will distribute \$1 million in grants to 58 religious congregations this year.

Grants ranging from \$2,000 to \$25,000 are awarded to congregations in need in 24 states and Puerto Rico. The funds are used to help with basic building repairs and safety features needed in the care of the elderly and infirm religious. Funds are primarily used for installing fire alarms and security systems or for replacing boilers, elevators and windows, and renovating rooms for handicapped accessibility.

Board members who reviewed the 2009 grant applications said they noticed more requests for help with basic needs.

A congregation in Puerto Rico, for example, requested assistance with medical bills, food expenses and personal necessities to facilitate the care of six of their infirm sisters. The sisters, with a median age of 80, were never compensated for their services during their working life and now in retirement rely on Social Security income, food stamps and the help of benefactors for their basic needs.

A February news release from SOAR noted that although the grants distributed this year are helpful in the short run, the needs of retired religious continue to escalate, in particular because of the recent loss of returns on investments.

SOAR, based in Washington, raises money through newsletters, videos, direct mailings, the sale of the CD "Sisters in Song," and gala dinners in Washington, New York and Southern California.

The organization and its fundraising efforts are separate from the annual Retirement Fund for Religious collection administered by the National Religious Retirement Office, which is also in Washington and based at the U.S. bishops' headquarters.

Despite the financial help these religious communities receive, the problem of

underfunded retirement liability for U.S. religious orders persists. The total underfunded retirement liability is estimated at more than \$6.8 billion.

The median age of women religious is 70.3 and of men religious is 65.3, according to SOAR, with fewer women and men entering religious life to replenish their ranks and support their elderly members. Meanwhile, the average annual Social Security benefit for all religious was \$4,402 in 2007, compared to \$12,132 for lay recipients.

The average cost of care for the sisters, based on 2007 data, was \$26,533 for independent living, \$42,738 for assisted living and \$51,348 for skilled nursing care.

More information about SOAR is available on the organization's Web site, www.soar-usa.org.