

# St. Vincent de Paul Society backs anti-poverty effort

ST. LOUIS – The new Campaign to Reduce Poverty in America launched by Catholic Charities USA is getting support from the public policy agency of the Missouri bishops and from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul's national council.

"Any way Catholic Charities and others can bring their direct experience of working with the poor to the Capitol building both here and in Washington, D.C., that's all the better," said Mike Hoey of the Missouri Catholic Conference, based in Jefferson City.

Too often discussions of economic policy focus solely on numbers, Mr. Hoey said. The right question is how the policy will affect people and how they can be protected, he added.

"We hope it gets to the point that lawmakers themselves will ask economists and others, 'How will this affect the individual?'" Mr. Hoey noted.

When Catholic Charities and others who provide services to the needy help lawmakers be sensitive to the poor before they make a decision, "that can have a tremendous impact," Mr. Hoey told the St. Louis Review, newspaper of the St. Louis Archdiocese.

"We have to see them as human beings created in the image and likeness of God," he added. "When we can have those who work directly with lower-income individuals and families tell their stories to policymakers, it brings the human dimension alive, and they have to confront the human face of the issue."

The Catholic Charities USA effort stems from a new policy paper, "Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good." The goal is to cut poverty in half by 2020.

Census figures show 37 million Americans living below the poverty line, about 12.6 percent of the population.

Catholic Charities and its more than 1,700 agencies and institutions plan to attack the structural roots of poverty by advocating in Washington and in state capitals for policy changes on health care, affordable housing, hunger and nutrition, and economic security for families.

In announcing the Society of St. Vincent de Paul's support for the effort, Joe Flannigan, the society's national president, said in a statement: "Our special mission is to help the poor. We help them by providing food, clothing and shelter, and by enabling them to provide those necessities for themselves.

"We also help by trying to remove the obstacles that stand in their way, the things that make it difficult for them to get by," he said.

Through Catholic Charities USA's campaign, "we will encourage our members of Congress and elected state government representatives to improve programs and policies," said Mr. Flannigan.

The largest lay Catholic organization in the world, the St. Louis-based society is best known for its thrift stores and food pantries, and for the personal visits of its members to the homes of the poor and needy.

Tom Mulhearn, president of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, said in a statement that cutting poverty "is a challenge we in St. Louis look forward to and with the dedicated staff in each of our eight federation agencies."

Catholic Charities St. Louis helps nearly 124,000 people in the St. Louis area alone, said Elizabeth Westhoff, director of communications.

"Our agency has been coping with a steady increase in demand for emergency assistance, primarily among working families, like many agencies across the nation," she said. "Each day our federation agencies serve families who work hard but still do not earn enough to provide for their basic needs."