

U.S. poverty called a major moral, policy challenge

WASHINGTON (CNS) – “Poverty remains our nation’s most serious political blind spot and one of our nation’s most profound moral failings,” says a new policy paper of Catholic Charities USA, “Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good.”

The policy paper, published in the form of a 28-page booklet released Jan. 10 at a briefing on Capitol Hill, sets the framework for Catholic Charities’ new Campaign to Reduce Poverty in America. The paper is also available in Spanish.

The goal of the campaign is to cut poverty in half by 2020. That would mean that the 37 million Americans now living below the poverty line, who form 12.6 percent of the country’s population, would have to drop to about 6 percent within 13 years.

“Poverty in this nation is an ongoing disaster that threatens the health and well-being of our country, which our children will inherit,” the paper says.

It says the spread of poverty in America “has been largely ignored” in recent years by politicians and the media, while the federal government “has substantially reduced the resources” devoted to assisting the poor.

“There has been a conscious and deliberate retreat from our nation’s commitment to economic justice for those who are poor,” it says.

The paper pledges Catholic Charities USA and its members – more than 1,700 local agencies and institutions nationwide – “to attack the structural roots of poverty by advocating in Washington, D.C., and state capitals for the policy changes outlined in this paper.”

It pledges a campaign to speak out in the public square and raise public understanding of poverty and its causes.

It says Catholic Charities agencies will continue to serve individuals and families who are poor, uphold their dignity and work to enable them “to actively participate

in and share in the responsibility for addressing the issues that brought them to our doors.”

At the same time, it says: “Faith-based groups and the nonprofit sector do not have the resources to replace those functions which are the legitimate responsibility of government and the private sector. Catholic Charities USA will not accept the proposition that agencies such as ours should substitute for some of the basic functions of government.”

It says Catholic agencies will work in partnership with other social service agencies, the private sector, the nonprofit sector and government on programs to decrease poverty.

The paper bluntly confronts the question of the revenue needed to fund such programs. “The taxes on America’s wealthiest families and on businesses have been reduced dramatically in the last 25 years. ... It is upper-income families who have prospered most during the last 25 years. ... Therefore it is only fair and just to ask these same families to bear a greater share of the responsibility for the costs of fighting poverty,” it says.

It points out that in 1998 the top 20 percent of the population held 83 percent of the total net wealth of the country and the remaining 80 percent held only 17 percent of the wealth - and “the gap is growing at rates that historically are almost unprecedented.”

“Our nation has not seen such extreme inequality since the 1920s,” it says.

The paper devotes five pages to specific policy proposals, which it summarizes in terms of two basic areas:

- “Creating more livable-wage jobs and raising the wages of existing low-paid jobs.”
- “Investing more of our common wealth in social welfare policies for low-income people.”

The paper notes that unemployment and old age are not the main causes of poverty in the United States: Nearly two-thirds of all families living below the poverty line

have one or more workers.

It calls for raising the minimum wage from the \$5.15 level established in 1997. The day the policy paper was released the House of Representatives voted to raise the minimum wage incrementally, to \$7.25 in 2009.

A summary of the social policies it calls for says the government should:

- Strengthen and protect the nation's nutrition safety net.
- Improve the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, known as TANF, to benefit more families.
- Ensure universal health insurance coverage.
- Support policies that strengthen families.
- Create more affordable housing.
- Improve the Earned Income Tax Credit so it is more inclusive.
- Improve access to education and training.
- Address the growing wealth disparity.

To accompany the policy paper, Catholic Charities USA also published a 31-page "Tools for Reflection and Action" with resources for use in charities agencies, in parishes and in study groups, including suggestions for developing an action plan for anti-poverty work and advocacy.

The policy paper, reflection and action guide and other resource materials connected with the campaign are all available on the Internet at www.catholiccharitiesusa.org.