

U.S. praised for fighting HIV/AIDS abroad

WASHINGTON - Catholic social ministry leaders got an unusual message Feb. 12 as they were preparing for a day of lobbying on Capitol Hill: Thank your legislators for supporting the funding of a massive program to combat the spread of the global AIDS/HIV pandemic.

On many issues that Catholic social activists bring up with their senators and representatives, they are challenging current legislation or seeking politically unpopular legislative reforms.

On the Presidential Emergency Program for AIDS Relief, however, "every year the president has asked for a certain amount of money Congress has always given more," said Oblate Father Andrew Small of the U.S. bishops' Office of International Justice and Peace.

A briefing on the program, commonly referred to as PEPFAR, was one of numerous sessions on specific legislative issues that participants at the annual Catholic Social Ministries Gathering attended to prepare for meetings with their legislators in Washington.

"Say, 'Thanks for your support for this, but we don't want you to think in any way that this is over,'" Father Small said.

Bill O'Keefe, senior director of advocacy at Catholic Relief Services, told some 70 social ministry leaders at the briefing that, while "we've made great progress in Congress" so far, the program "ends at the end of 2008 unless Congress reauthorizes it."

"We're talking here about a problem that keeps getting worse. We need a solution that keeps getting bigger and better," he said.

President George W. Bush initiated the program in 2003, setting the goal of spending \$15 billion over the next five years on programs of AIDS education and

prevention and the distribution of antiretroviral drugs to those with HIV in 15 countries most badly affected by AIDS.

O'Keefe also urged the group to call attention to the importance of keeping a conscience clause in the legislation so that Catholic agencies such as CRS, the overseas aid agency of the U.S. church, are not shut out of the program because they refuse to hand out condoms.

He said CRS is engaged in effective treatment and prevention programs using PEPFAR funds, but before the conscience clause was enacted it had no access to those funds because it refused to include condom distribution in its education and prevention programs.

In lobbying on the program he also suggested that the social ministry leaders ask their legislators to:

- Continue to support abstinence and fidelity as central components of preventive education.
- Maintain "robust" funding to build on what the program has already achieved.
- Commit more funding to strengthen the health care systems in the target countries because AIDS has overwhelmed those systems.
- Expand the current list of 15 target countries, adding other countries on the basis of their rates of infection.

O'Keefe told the group that the House of Representatives recently approved \$4.5 billion for the AIDS program in a 2007 continuing resolution, and that resolution was due to come before the Senate later in the week. Anyone visiting his or her senator should ask the senator to keep the House level of funding for that program when it comes to a vote, he said.

He said now is the time to begin pressing for reauthorization of the program for another five years after 2008.