

PARISH SOCIAL MINISTRY

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IN THIS ISSUE:

Legislative Advocacy &
Catholic Social Teaching
page 1

Advocacy “How To”
page 3

Focus on the Parish:
Church of the Incarnation,
Charlottesville, VA
page 4

CCUSA Webinar on PSM
and Legislative Advocacy
page 5



Working to Reduce Poverty in America.



By Collen Mayer

In one of the daily homilies Francis gave soon after becoming Pope, he said, “a good Catholic meddles in politics” (September 16, 2013). I think his remarks were directed at people like me. A couple of years ago when I attended the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington DC, I was invited to lead advocacy visits to Tennessee legislators on Capitol Hill to discuss social issues affecting our Church and world. I have to admit, I felt a bit intimidated at first. Though I’d worked for nonprofit organizations for a long time, and I had regularly been involved in services and programs that provide aid to those in need, engaging in advocacy in Washington DC felt very intimidating to me. In other words, though I was comfortable working with programs that provide food to families who are hungry and job training for the underemployed, advocating for policies that maintain food stamp benefits and the earned income tax credit for these same families felt uncomfortable and out of my area of expertise.

article continues on page 2

Despite my reservations about the legislative visits, my trip to the Hill was meaningful and productive. Though the staff and legislators that we met with did not necessarily agree with all of the Churches' positions on domestic and international social issues, we were able to find common ground in many places and offer new perspectives on issues on which we disagreed. Through these advocacy visits my colleagues and I shared stories with the legislators of the people with whom we work at Catholic Charities, thereby giving a face and a voice to the important social issues that can often seem abstract on Capitol Hill.

These advocacy visits were a very appropriate way to wrap up our time at the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, and to begin practicing what we had been learning and discussing throughout the conference. The conference stressed first and foremost that the Catholic social tradition calls all people of faith to be advocates for the needs of the world and to work for the healing of unjust social structures. For example, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, CCHD, speaks of the "two feet of love in action." CCHD insists that Christian charity must manifest itself in both direct service to the poor and vulnerable (which comprises much of our work at Catholic Charities) and advocacy for social justice (our commitment to address the root causes of poverty and injustice in the areas in which we work). Pope Francis regularly urges all the Christian faithful to raise their voices for persons in need. In his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, he writes, "Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society" (187). Later in the document, he adds, "None of us can think we are exempt from concern for the poor and for social justice" (201).

Of course Pope Francis' words contribute to a long biblical and social tradition which speaks of our call as people of faith to advocate for the poor and marginalized. Scripture is unequivocal about this responsibility. Isaiah exhorts people of faith to "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (1:17). Proverbs says, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (31:8-9). The documents of Catholic social teaching documents regularly

return to this theme, including USCCB's Economic Justice for All. The US Bishops insist that ending poverty is a "moral imperative of the highest priority." Speaking to the joint demands of personal charitable acts and work for social justice, they say:

"As individuals, all citizens have a duty to assist the poor through acts of charity and personal commitment. But private charity and voluntary action are not sufficient. We also carry out our moral responsibility to assist and empower the poor by working collectively through government to establish just and effective public policies" (189).

The wisdom of the Catholic social tradition which speaks to the importance of advocating for just social structures, certainly informs our work at Catholic Charities and in parish social ministry. Catholic social teaching reminds us that to create long-term change we must pair our charitable works with bold advocacy for the rights of the poor and vulnerable. As we work to house those who are homeless, we can ask our governments to create more affordable housing for low-income families. As we serve refugees, we also can speak boldly about our responsibility as a nation to welcome those fleeing violence and to address the social conditions which lead to violence and poverty in the world. And as we distribute hot meals and food boxes for those who are hungry, we can also raise our voices to preserve food stamp benefits for hard-working persons struggling to feed their families and make ends meet.

At the conclusion of our visits on Capitol Hill a few years ago, I remember that one legislative staff person left us with a request: she asked us to "flood her inbox" with stories about our clients and the obstacles they face. I believe that she knew, as did we, the importance of bringing forth the voices of those who are struggling in our community, because their stories need to be heard. By embracing the call of Catholic social teaching to engage in advocacy, we are able to give a voice to those who aren't always able to speak out for their own needs. Through advocating for the poor and vulnerable we walk in the footsteps of the prophets by calling for the systemic change which alone can bring sustained hope and healing to our world. ■

Collen Mayer is Social Services Department Director for Catholic Charities of Tennessee.



CATHOLIC CHARITIES USA STRATEGIC PRIORITY:

Advocacy and Social Policy Initiatives

Catholic Charities USA has adopted a set of new strategic priorities for 2017-2022. One priority is to elevate Advocacy and Social Policy Initiatives as expressed in this way:

Integrate and leverage the expertise of the Catholic Charities ministries on relevant federal policy concerns.

[Click here to read more about CCUSA's strategic priorities.](#)

Advocacy “How To”

By Sr. Betsy Van Deusen, CSJ

Perhaps you have heard of the two feet of justice – one foot for direct service and the other for advocacy. It seems that the first “foot” gets a lot more attention and is much more attractive to our parishioners. Direct service puts them face to face with our brothers and sisters in need. It makes them feel good and helps them recognize that they are making a difference. When I do workshops on Justice and Catholic Social Teaching I often have participants stand on one foot and I continue to talk about some other things and after 3-5 minutes tell them they can put their foot down. We reflect on how difficult it is to stand on one foot for a long time and discuss the reason for Advocacy in any and all conversations about Justice. We need both direct service and advocacy!

One thing we know is that Advocacy is hard work. Advocacy does not have immediate results or outcomes. Advocacy changes systems and is imperative to our work for justice and to make a lasting impact in our world. Why does it have to be so hard and complicated? The short answer - our systems are complicated.

You serve on the Parish Social Ministry Team or the Social Justice Ministry of your parish and know that you want to move the group to being advocates around issues you discuss at your meetings. How do you begin?

First, visit this website: www.wearesaltand-light.org/find-resources/advocacy-toolkit/ and spend some time familiarizing yourself with it. Do not become overwhelmed! There is a great deal of information but very quick-

ly it will become clear what will work best for you and what may come in handy later. Your own discernment is important and others in your group doing this same first step and praying about it will be critical.

Second, begin to talk with your group and pray together about what issue you would like to start with. You can't do everything and so pick one and “do” the process and with this experience, other issues will follow.

Third, know your community and what they will get behind and consult with your Pastor (or Parish Life Director) and be sure he or she is on board and will be helping your group to spread the word, read the post, check the bulletin. The words from the pulpit go a long way in having your community pay attention!

Fourth, touch base with other local parishes to see what they are doing and determine if there are things you can share or do in common. Perhaps you have a vicariate or a deanery structure and a conversation at that level will make a bigger impact than one or two parishes.

And most importantly, trust! You are about a noble work and you have resources and companions and the Prince of Peace in it with you. You cannot fail, you are going to make people aware and have them express their faith to a bigger audience. Those two feet will slowly but surely be moving at a run! ■

Sr. Betsy VanDeusen, CST, is Director of Community Partnerships with Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Albany

FOCUS ON THE PARISH:

Church of the Incarnation, Charlottesville, VA

By Shelia Herlihy

Two years ago, I joined an 18 year old immigrant named Rodrigo who was hoping to go to college but couldn't afford it without in-state tuition, and a father named Anthony who had adopted two children and wanted to ensure that life received protection. Together the three of us walked the halls of the Virginia General Assembly on Catholic Advocacy Day to speak up to lawmakers on behalf of our faith. Catholic Advocacy Day was an event put on by the Virginia Catholic Conference, the public policy advocacy organization representing the bishops in Virginia. We had taken a bus from our parish, Church of the Incarnation, to the state capital. There, representatives of the VCC had presented on various policy priorities for the legislative session, and trained us to talk to our representatives. The VCC works with the two dioceses in Virginia, along with Commonwealth Catholic Charities, to create resources for parishioners and to advocate on behalf of our faith priorities. Now, we arrived at the meat of the day: sharing our views and making the Catholic voice heard in the Virginia statehouse.

Our first stop was our left-leaning state senator, but as he was out of his office, we simply left some policy sheets with his staffer and signed our names. Then we visited our more conservative delegate. Since Rodrigo's story was so personal, we let him talk about in-state tuition for DACA recipients first. Our delegate was very polite, but strongly disagreed. We explained why it was such a central tenet of our faith, and he listened, but maintained his position. Before we left, Anthony thanked him for all his work providing protections for unborn children. This experience really personified in my mind that the Catholic faith does not fall neatly under political party lines, and that advocacy has real life consequences for real people.

Since that day in the capitol, many laws have passed: some helpful to immigrants and some harmful; some in support of unborn life,

Parish Social Ministry and Legislative Advocacy

Friday, February 15, 2:00 pm – 3:00 pm, EST
A webinar by Catholic Charities USA

This webinar, hosted by the Parish Social Ministry Leadership Team, will identify those issues CCUSA will seek to advance with Congress and the new Administration, and will offer practical strategies on how to motivate and organize a parish community to advocate on a particular issue.

Presenters include:

- **Lucas Swanepoel**, Senior Director, Government Affairs, Catholic Charities USA
- **Shannon Rosedale**, Public Affairs and Relations Manager, Catholic Charities Fort Worth
- **Ivone Guillen**, Catholic Social Teaching Education Coordinator, Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

[Click here to register.](#)



article continues on page 5

and some endangering it. At Church of the Incarnation, we try to emphasize the Two Feet of Love in Action: both Justice and Charity. Justice is more challenging, but has bigger consequences, whether positive or negative. I could see that when in-state tuition became a reality (albeit through the executive branch rather than the legislative), Rodrigo benefited. When the legislature reduced funding for abortions, Anthony knew that other children, like his own, would get the chance to have a bright future. These are big impacts, and we can affect them by communicating with our elected officials.

The VCC no longer hosts Catholic Advocacy Day, but instead encourages people to build personal relationships with their repre-

sentatives, and email when particular pieces of legislation are up for a vote. At Incarnation, our involvement in public life hasn't diminished. We have parishioners who participate in the VCC's email advocacy network, and we run a drive to get more people signed up every year. And even though VCC doesn't have a specific day in the capitol, many of our parishioners make it a point to go, especially with groups like the Virginia Coalition of Latino Organizations to advocate for driver's licenses for immigrants. The pro-life issue also continues, with parishioners active in Virginians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty and the 40 Days for Life campaign. ■

Sheila Herlihy is coordinator of justice and Charity at Church of the Incarnation in Charlottesville, Virginia.

CATHOLIC CHARITIES USA: Parish Social Ministry News & Notes

Click [here to register](#) for a biweekly email of information about Catholic Charities' and partner organizations' event, news, publications, and other resources that support Parish Social Ministry (PSM).

