

Churches Boost Efforts to Aid Poor As Federal Budget Cuts Make Impact

By Tammy Tanaka
Religious News Service

Churches and synagogues across the nation, long called on to help feed the starving people of the world, suddenly face the rising problem of domestic hunger needs.

Inflation, unemployment and federal welfare cutbacks have thrown the American social services system into chaos — and church voluntary agencies find increasing numbers of people who "fall between the cracks" coming to them for help.

Trends are just beginning to emerge. Major Protestant and Catholic agencies which provided comprehensive services with the aid of federal funds have suffered severe cutbacks and are operating with "barebone" budgets and staff.

Meanwhile, networks of voluntary locally-based church food banks and other emergency projects appear to be emerging across the country. While most of these

operations which have sprung up in the last year are not equipped to provide anything except emergency food, and face numerous problems because of their inexperience, they could be the beginning of a major shift of responsibility from government welfare to private volunteerism.

Church leaders, however, have repeatedly said it is impossible to expect the private sector to completely replace the human services which the government has provided for the needy, and that the government and churches will need to continue a partnership effort.

In Boston, the Franciscan Friars have already started the city's first outdoor breadline since Lyndon Johnson began the "Great Society" war on poverty. A growing number of people who find they're "simply unable to make ends meet" are now lining up for the free coffee and sandwiches, says Father Joseph Nagle, who runs the breadline at St. Anthony's Shrine. The program was started about six months ago.



An informal survey of 34 National Council of Churches-related domestic hunger projects indicates that they are being hit with a "quadruple whammy," says Martha Robson, who conducted the NCC survey. "They must contend with budget cuts, increasing inflation, increased demand for their services because of rising unemployment and cuts in other social services, and finally, increased competition for the very church and foundation funding they need to survive."

Mathew Ahmann, assistant director for government relations of the National Conference of Catholic Charities, reports that an analysis is under way on the impact of the cutbacks on Catholic agencies.

He points out about 49 percent of the budgets of Catholic Charities came from government funds, for a "whole range of some 60 programs, such as low income housing, day care, child welfare, counseling. One of the reasons the federal funding is so high is that it includes payments for foster care."

"We've heard from different parts of the country, and the impact of the cuts depends where they are and what their programs were," Ahmann said. "Charitable giving is up, but in no way will the giving make up for the cuts. Increasing numbers are coming for aid... We hear tremendous numbers of feeding programs are being set up, largely on a volunteer basis."

Catholic Charities programs stand to lose \$100 million if all the proposed budget cuts are implemented, Ahmann said.

The mushrooming numbers of voluntary feeding programs and food banks appear to include various types of church operations. Long established groups such as the St. Vincent de Paul Society, whose programs for the poor have been largely based on voluntary funds, are simply continuing what they've been doing. They are being joined by other churches which are either expanding or organizing new food programs for their immediate neighborhoods.

"Our biggest single need is food; it's been true since the 30s," says Vincent Reilly, an executive secretary of the St. Vincent society in Manhattan. "We've never kept up with needs; it's like trying to plug the dike with your thumb."

Reilly said the society "has never had any federally funded programs," but was indirectly hit by a little noticed cut in Social Security benefits — the \$250 burial benefit for single persons.

"Since 1972, we have buried 1,500 people using the \$250 Social Security burial benefit everyone was entitled to," he said, noting that the elimination of this payment for single persons has created a serious hardship, since most of their elderly clients fall in this category.

President Reagan, backed by religious conservatives, holds that most welfare needs can be solved with thrift, hard work and voluntary charity. He says his administration will continue providing for the "poorest of the poor."

In an effort to stimulate volunteerism, Reagan has created a Task Force on Private Sector Initiatives, composed of leaders from corporations, foundations, and voluntary and religious groups. Several members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), which operates a successful church welfare program, serve on this task force. This group

hasn't yet issued any recommendations.

In Minneapolis, a suburban Catholic religion director has started a branch of a program called Loaves and Fishes, based on the bible Bible story of Jesus feeding the multitude.

Whatever else the president has done, "Reagan has reminded us that we have an obligation to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and bury the dead," says Tom Aspholm, religious education director at the Church of Mary, Mother of the Church in Burnsville. "For that, I think he's right."

However, as Martha Robson says in her report for the National Council of Churches, the church has always "carried on its 'business' of helping the helpless" in partnership with the government since the Depression, and it is unrealistic to expect churches to now "pick up the slack."



Monitoring the Effect Of Reaganomics Here

By John Dash

Church social service agencies, including those run by the Diocese of Rochester, are among several local operations taking part in a unique program monitoring the effect federal budget cuts in social service are having in the area.

A preliminary report from that program indicated last week that the cuts may involve between \$35 million and \$45 million in overall county budgets of \$300-400 million.

The monitoring is being done by the Center for Governmental Research at the behest of a number of civic and religious groups. Father Charles Mulligan said last week. The study has been under way for several months, he said.

Father Mulligan is diocesan director of social ministries and is chairman of the group which commissioned the study.

The research, he said, is to provide "a real measure over the next three years" of the impact the budget cuts will have.

The \$35-45 million projected cut is at best an educated guess, he said. Nevertheless, the study will provide a "base-line" for measuring the effect federal money has on social programs, and is of itself "a consistent part of the strategy of the churches" in lobbying efforts for welfare funds, he said.

In Monroe County, "the impression is that agencies are losing money, cutting back on services and cutting back on staff," Craig H. Smith said last week. Smith is development director for the research center.

The study is unusual, Smith

noted, in that "this is the first time (social service groups) have shared (budget) data among themselves to take an aggregate sight of the situation and apply it to their own needs and wants."

"The picture," he said, "will be significant to each of the organizations supplying information to the project."

Prior to the federal budget cuts, he said, there was never the impetus to gather such data.

Despite such cooperation, however, gathering and analyzing data is quite difficult, both men agree. Smith said researchers must "grapple with a rather complex set of programs from 150 to 200 agencies running between 500 and 600 programs."

In addition to agency data, the center is "going to make some attempt to track individual cases, by looking at social services received last July and this July," Smith noted. He said such a study could be used to draw "some important conclusions."

It is the opinion of those involved in the study that the crunch will actually hit in the last quarter of this calendar year, Smith said. "We are wary about what's happening."

According to a summary published last week by the center, the study is concentrating on 100 direct service programs which together are budgeted for \$30.5 million in total expenditures.

Twenty percent of that money comes from the federal government, 30 percent from the state, and 50 percent from local government, the United Way, private funding sources and fees.

A large percentage, 80 percent, of the programs have reported no effect from the federal cuts. Researchers feel, however, that situation is due to the programs receiving federal money only indirectly, and that the effect of the cuts will not be noted until the end of this year.

Private Sector Can't Do Job: Reagan Aide

New York (RNS) — Malcolm Baldrige, secretary of commerce, acknowledged here that the private sector cannot make up all the social services cut by the federal government.

Addressing the 150th anniversary of the Episcopal Missions Society of the Diocese of New York, Baldrige urged business to accept its responsibility for providing jobs with the money it will save through federal tax cuts.

While stressing that it is in the "self-interest" of both individuals and business to help society, Baldrige admitted that "the whole gap can't be made up" by non-governmental enterprises.

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