

DIOCESAN NEWS



(From left) Patricia McCormick, Michael Sanders, 2, and Larry Jones protest outside the Department of Social Services on Westfall Road March 18 against the fingerprinting of welfare recipients.

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Priests among DSS protest arrestees

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

Four people — including two priests — were arrested March 18 at the Monroe County Department of Social Services offices at 111 Westfall Road during a protest over the county's decision to expand fingerprinting of public assistance recipients.

Arrested were Father Paul English, CSB, Father Richard C. O'Connell, Jan Bezila and John "Pat" O'Hara. They were scheduled to appear in Rochester City Court March 20 on charges of third-degree criminal trespass.

The arrests followed the announcement that as of March 11, heads of households receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children in Monroe County were to be fingerprinted.

The county has been fingerprinting recipients of Home Relief, the program for able-bodied childless adults, since August.

The goal of the electronic fingerprinting program is to catch any individuals who are illegally receiving benefits through two counties or under different names — a practice referred to as "double-dipping."

News of the expansion led to protests at the Monroe County Legislature meeting March 12, and, unrelated to the arrests of the four activists, picketing at the DSS office building the morning of March 18.

Father English was arrested after he entered the DSS offices the afternoon of March 18 and requested that he, too, be

fingerprinted. He declined to leave when asked, and was joined by the other three people. All four were then arrested.

In explaining his actions, Father English said he was following the example of the Danish people who, during Nazi occupation, from the king down wore yellow Stars of David in support of the Danish Jews.

"I can either stand with these people, or I can stand by and do nothing," Father English said of welfare recipients.

The earlier protest at the legislature meeting included representatives of the House of Mercy, which works with the inner-city poor, and Father Neil Miller, pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish.

Sister Grace Miller, RSM, director of the House of Mercy, participated in that protest, as well as the picketing March 18.

"A lot of our people are saying it's humiliating," noted Sister Miller, who herself was arrested July 25, 1995, for a protest at the DSS office over fingerprinting.

Also arrested at that time were fellow House of Mercy staff members, Sisters Rita Lewis and Gloria Ruocco. Their arrests followed the July 10 arrests of three men in another fingerprinting protest.

"The whole thing is focusing on scapegoating the poor for the good of society," Sister Miller contended after her talk to the legislature. "We know in corporate welfare there is greater fraud."

Father Miller also spoke before the legislature, with 15 members of his parish's confirmation class surrounding him. Ironically, they had planned to attend a legisla-

ture meeting anyway as part of a confirmation service project.

After he criticized expansion of the program, Father Miller said, the youths "all shouted 'Amen! Alleluia!'"

The county is mandated to carry out the fingerprinting program under state law, noted Don Vicanti, coordinator for client support services for the county DSS.

The heads of AFDC families are to be fingerprinted when they first apply for benefits, or when they seek their annual re-certification. Vicanti estimated it would take about a year before all current recipients are fingerprinted.

Since fingerprinting went into effect for Home Relief recipients last August, no one has been caught double-dipping, Vicanti acknowledged. He noted that 12 people had refused to be fingerprinted, but that it was not clear why.

Some proponents have said that, at the least, fingerprinting would discourage people from applying for benefits out of fear of being caught double-dipping. But Vicanti said such an effect will be difficult to determine until at least a year's worth of caseload statistics are in.

Still, Vicanti remains convinced it will work and will save the county money.

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opponents have said.

Father Tormey pointed out that he has a personal stake in seeing SOA closed because Sister Jo Ford, a Maryknoll sister whom he befriended in Bolivia, was raped and killed in El Salvador in November 1980, reportedly by SOA graduates.

"We can't control what the soldiers do at home," Father Tormey commented. "But we don't want our tax dollars being used to train them."

According to several sources, SOA alumni were also implicated in the assassination of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980. (The school has repeatedly declined comment about SOA opponents' claims in previous stories.)

The Fort Benning-based SOA Watch, a group organized by Maryknoll Father Roy Bourgeois, is leading the fast and vigil March 19-28. SOA Watch has been active for years in protests outside the U.S. Army base at Fort Benning, and has led previous failed attempts to get Congress to close the school.

SOA Watch hopes to persuade Congress to pass legislation sponsored by U.S. Rep. Joseph Kennedy, a Massachusetts Democrat, which once again calls for SOA to close. Kennedy's bill would replace SOA with a "U.S. Academy for Democracy and Military Relations." The new academy would stress the proper role of the military in a civilian-run democracy, and bar combat training, according to SOA Watch.

An aide with Kennedy's office told the *Catholic Courier* that the new approach to closing down SOA is designed, in part, to alleviate concerns among some representatives about the potential loss of employment resulting in the Fort Benning area.

SOA Watch can be reached at 706/682-5369.

— Rob Cullivan

"Anything that prevents people from doing something illegal is in the long run going to save money and free up more money for people who need it," he said.

Sister Miller, however, remains convinced that the emotional effects of the program outweigh any financial savings, noting that the people she serves equate fingerprinting with the legal system.

"It further dehumanizes our people," she declared.

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