

WORLD & NATION

More people seek out Catholic Charities aid

By Patricia Zapor
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Despite the healthy national economy, 2 million more people asked for help from Catholic Charities agencies in 1996.

Nearly half the 12.8 million people receiving help from the 1,400 agencies in the Catholic Charities network came for food, reported Jesuit Father Fred Kammer, president of Catholic Charities USA Dec. 10.

"We are especially startled that hunger continues at an alarming rate despite a growing economy, low unemployment and even before the full effects of welfare reform have kicked in," said Father Kammer, reporting at a press conference on the latest annual survey of the U.S. church's domestic social services agencies.

Many of the effects of the 1996 welfare law will not be reflected until next year's report. They include dramatic reductions in the number of people receiving food stamps — including most legal immigrants — and new limits on how long individuals may receive government assistance.

Father Kammer and other speakers said for one thing, the government should be taking more responsibility to confront persistent poverty and support needy families, including raising the minimum wage, providing better health care coverage and increasing assistance for emergency food and shelter.

He said those who come to Catholic Charities for help are in a variety of situations.

"Some are working families with children whose minimum wages cannot stretch to cover rent, child care, clothing, medicine and food," he said. Others are between jobs or lack the skills for available jobs. Fewer than half receive welfare.

"Still others — elderly, sick, unemployed, homeless — are the forgotten poor who simply do not show up on anyone's social or economic radar screen."

Although the data in the report is nearly a year old, the number of people needing emergency assistance in 1997 also increased, according to the directors of Catholic Charities programs in New York City, Chicago and Omaha, Neb.

"The engine of economic success has pulled the train out of the station, leaving behind the working poor, immigrants and the elderly," said Father Michael M. Boland, administrator of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

"We're seeing people who historically have never come to us for help," such as senior citizens and the working poor, said Father Boland.

In Omaha, food pantries run by Catholic Charities saw a 40 percent increase in clients in 1996, said Scot Adams, director of the program.

In 1996, Catholic Charities pantries in Omaha provided food to 26,000 people, nearly a 40 percent increase over the previous year, he said. "But even this wasn't enough. In 1996, we had to close our pantry doors 79 days due to lack of funds. We turned people away."

Adams and Sister Anne Murray, a Sister of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus who is director of Catholic Charities of New York, described some of their clients as people who are working but can't make ends meet.

"People like Fran who works two part-time jobs — four hours at each, over the course of five and a half days — at two area hotels, no benefits, \$6.50 per hour," Adams said. The single mother of three receives \$35 a month in food stamps, but at the end of the month she comes to St. Martin de Porres Center in North Omaha because she's run out of money.

Sister Murray described a mother of six, including an infant, whose husband is in the Dominican Republic. The woman found it difficult to work because of a complicated pregnancy and receives no public assistance. She lives with two other families — 17 people in all — in a three-room basement apartment.

Father Kammer said the statistics from Catholic Charities agencies don't begin to cover all the efforts of church-connected food pantries.

"Every parish I've been associated with for 20 years has had some kind of a food pantry," he said. Yet those often are not part of any formal network reporting who receives help.

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