

# Housing tops public-policy agenda

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

The Diocese of Rochester's Public Policy Committee has designated affordable housing as its top advocacy issue for 2005, according to Jack Balinsky, diocesan director of Catholic Charities.

The committee also plans to promote education on two other issues: the bioethics of research on embryonic and adult stem cells; and awareness of and solidarity with Africa, noted Balinsky, Jann K. Armantrout, diocesan life-issues coordinator, and Ruth Putnam, Works of Love coordinator.

The three Catholic Charities officials discussed the committee's agenda during a roundtable interview at the diocesan Pastoral Center in late October. A summary of their discussion follows:

• **Affordable housing:** In the coming months, the diocese will provide parishes and faith communities with a variety of informational materials about affordable-housing issues, Balinsky said. The materials may be used in preparation for Diocesan Public Policy Sunday Feb. 5-6, an annual event that highlights one issue selected by the Public Policy Committee.

In addition to providing parishes with materials, Balinsky noted the diocese has tentatively slated a Jan. 10 video conference on the topic for parish leaders.

Balinsky and Armantrout said affordable housing was chosen this year because it's an issue that relates to how Catholic Charities clients deal with such other issues as poverty and/or recovery from substance abuse. Armantrout noted she had recently discussed the topic of affordable housing with heads of various departments at Rochester's Catholic Family Center.

"Every department said that finding housing where people can live with dignity is a challenge," she noted.

One-quarter of the households in the Diocese of Rochester are facing some sort of housing difficulty, Balinsky said, noting that such challenges include inadequate plumbing or kitchen facilities as well as rents that consume more than half of the household's income.

According to materials provided by Catholic Charities, diocesan Catholics have long been involved in housing issues.

Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation Inc., a joint effort of the Catholic and Episcopal dioceses of Rochester, provides ser-

vices and advocacy for low-income people in the Rochester Diocese and Allegheny County. Providence Housing Development Corp., an affiliate of the Rochester Diocese, has helped more than 1,000 men, women and children in a dozen counties obtain safe, affordable, lead-free housing. It has also supported refurbishing of decaying landmark buildings into modern housing; provided rent subsidies to homeless people; and offered credit counseling to hundreds of families. In addition, many Catholic parishioners have participated in Habitat for Humanity projects.

• **Stem cells:** If there's one message Armantrout wants to get out, it's that the Catholic Church does support research on stem cells — adult stem cells, that is. These cells are found in the umbilical-cord blood of babies and in the bodies of adults, and hold potential for the treatment of such ailments as Parkinson's disease and cancer, she noted.

The church's opposition is focused on the use of stem cells harvested from aborted babies and cloned embryos, she noted, because such cells are taken from beings the church considers fully human and worthy of legislative protection.

Advocates of using embryonic stem cells have confused the public on the issue, Armantrout said, by failing to distinguish between embryonic and adult stem cells, and by attacking pro-life advocates opposed to using unborn children for stem-cell harvests.

"If you had a 10th-grade biology education, you can get this," she said, noting that the church, in arguing against harvesting stem cells from embryos, is simply reiterating its position that all human life begins at conception.

Armantrout noted that the state Assembly passed legislation in June that would allow human cloning for the purpose of conducting medical experimentation. The bill — A.6249-A — legalizes the creation of human clones as well as the destruction of human embryos for research. A similar bill, S.7524, is pending in the state Senate.

Armantrout urged diocesan Catholics to contact their legislators to express opposition to these bills. She also urged Catholics to register with the Catholic Advocacy Network by visiting [www.nyscatholic.conference.org](http://www.nyscatholic.conference.org) and clicking on "Join the Network" so that they can stay updated on is-

suages of concern. She added that she is available to speak to parishes and groups about stem cells, and can be contacted at 585/328-3210, ext. 1304.

• **Africa:** Putnam noted that the diocese is beginning a two-year effort to heighten awareness of and solidarity with Africa.

Diocesan officials have already held a meeting with African priests serving in the diocese to learn more about their home continent, she said, and are looking at possibly holding an event to celebrate African culture. The diocese wants Catholics to realize that there is more to Africa than the wars and other ills that plague it, which always seem to dominate news com-

ing out of the continent, she said.

"Africa is not a single culture," she said. "Africa is a rich blend of several different cultures."

She added that some diocesan parishes have sister parishes in Africa, and that the Rochester Diocese is also home to many Africans or people with experience on the continent.

Putnam noted that parishes and groups wishing to learn more about Africa may request materials provided by Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency. CRS has a video titled "Africa Rising" as well as a kit to help parishes. For more information, contact Judy Taylor at 585/328-3210, ext. 1303.

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