



CATHOLIC CHARITIES USA

# Providing a Voice For the Poor

By RON JACKSON

**T**hink you know Catholic Charities? Look deeper — I bet you'll be surprised. People often tell me they know all about Catholic Charities' soup kitchens, coat drives, an annual Christmas fund-raiser. Some might mention local resume-writing classes or social enterprise endeavors like bake and furniture sales and other services for people struggling to lift themselves out of poverty. But only a few know that, as a movement, Catholic Charities has a dual mission and is committed to living out both components — providing charity and seeking justice.

The truth is, undertaking acts of charity without seeking a fairer and more just social system is fighting poverty only halfway. When our society carries on discussions about social mobility and strengthening families, the Catholic Charities network has a responsibility to bring policymakers — the men and women who serve the voters — some of the stories and faces of those struggling to make ends meet.

Some may call it a fool's errand to try to engage legislators or administrators on ways to make a more effective response to poverty. Yet I have seen — through a long career working for the church and affiliated organizations — that ignoring our Catholic call to advocacy would leave us on the sidelines when important decisions are being made.

Pope Francis and I are in agreement. In *Lumen Fidei*, he says that our faith "teaches us to create just forms of government, in the realization that authority comes from God and is meant for the service of the common good." If we do not witness on behalf of justice, we are abandoning our

responsibilities as servants of the Gospel.

My first day in Washington, D.C. was on August 25, 1974, as a 21-year-old intern on Capitol Hill — two weeks after President Richard Nixon had stepped down and left our nation in a state of confusion. I remember very vividly that even though the president had left office, public distrust of elected officials ran high and politically partisan attacks went back and forth, there still was an underlying cordiality on Capitol Hill, an implicit agreement that despite political or ideological differences, members of Congress or lobbyists with different ideas could come together to pursue the common good.

What a different time from today.

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Illustration by Roy Scott



## DISAGREEMENTS AND DIVISIONS

I can say that I have never known the level of ideological distrust to be this bad — not just in the halls of Congress, but in communities across America. Our society has very deep divisions that sometimes can feel impossible to bridge. A hyper-partisan political discourse, increased economic and social stratification and growth of polarized news outlets are just some of the symptoms — or perhaps they are causes — of the threats to the common good and to our democracy. Far too often, the impact of these disagreements and the resulting social breakdown fall most heavily on the poor, the vulnerable, the historically disenfranchised. In short, they fall on the people whom we, as a nation, should be most dedicated to raising up and empowering.

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As a parent and a grandparent, as well as someone who has spent his entire life advocating for the poor, I am concerned. But I am not without hope. Catholic Charities agencies' wonderful work throughout all 50 states leaves me feeling that somehow, some way, things will work out. The energy, compassion and goodwill of so many staff, volunteers and benefactors makes me believe there is still a critical mass of people committed to building a society in which everyone — whether they are black or white, documented or undocumented, born or unborn, physically able or handicapped, rich or poor, young or old — has the opportunity to achieve his or her full, God-given potential.

## GETTING CREATIVE

So what do we need to do? As we all know, to get elected to office today, you have to have a lot of money — a lot of it. But there's no super PAC (political action committee) supporting candidates as part of a national campaign to promote the common good, charity and justice. So we have to be creative.

Politicians count two things: checks and votes. Without necessarily engaging in political parties or movements, we can still be active. In the Catholic faith tradition, we can — and must! — be a

voice for the poor. We can — and must! — educate politicians about the impact of their decisions on programs critical to people's daily lives. And we can — and must! — help those impacted by policy decisions to realize that they have a fundamental right to let their voices be heard.

Catholic Charities USA has a special calling to empower the advocacy efforts of our member agencies and the people they serve. Our mission is to represent the agencies living out the church's call to be the hands of Christ reaching out to those in need. In order for us to do so effectively, we are pursuing deeper collaboration than ever before with partners like the Catholic Health Association and its members, as well as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Relief Services, the National Association of State Catholic Conference Directors, the National Catholic Rural Life Network and many others who advocate for the common good and pursue policies that increase justice and opportunity in our nation.

Like different instruments in a symphony orchestra, we each have our own role to play. But when we work together and from the same book, the total impact of our efforts can be much greater than the mere sum of its parts.

It's not that we never have worked together in the past — but the fact that our challenges are as steep as they are, and the political polarization is as entrenched as it is, means that the only way we can have a collective impact is by being intentional about strengthening and integrating our work as church-associated and faith-based organizations committed to the common good.

## CCUSA MISSION

The three core elements of our mission at CCUSA are to support our member agencies through service, convening and advocacy. Service is our daily function of supporting our member agencies who work to help individuals and families meet basic human needs. Convening means providing opportunities for our network to come together, such as at opportunities to share best practices. And advocacy means leveraging the voice of the agencies working on the ground to illustrate the impact of anti-poverty programs and to work collaboratively with others of good will to reduce, and someday end, poverty in America.

Our role in the symphony orchestra is to blend three distinct disciplines into one unique voice — to bring together the accumulated wisdom and



insights from theology, public policy and social work in a voice that can be provided only by Catholic Charities. Likewise, Catholic hospitals and health care systems have a unique voice to provide in the discussion of building a more just and compassionate society, as do members of our other partner groups.

As the national representative of our members, we know that we cannot develop solutions on our own and that our voice, by itself, will not be enough to sway how decisions are made in Washington, D.C. But working together with our Catholic partners, we believe that the voice of our agencies — and critically, the people they serve every day — simply must be included in any discussion about efforts to create meaningful and systemic change of our nation's antipoverty efforts.

Make no mistake: even though it is more than 50 years since President Lyndon Johnson initiated the War on Poverty, the time for those conversations is now. But how do we pursue reform in a

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way that respects the dignity of the human person, advances the common good, and aligns with our faith's understanding of subsidiarity and solidarity? That is where the role of advocates becomes so vital.

Our unique blend of theology, public policy, and social work practice is heavily influenced by our Catholic Charities USA Code of Ethics, which serves as a broad guide to the organizational behavior of our network in light of our principles as Catholic institutions. In advocating on behalf of the disenfranchised, poor and marginalized, we examine policy proposals through five pillars: food insecurity, homelessness, housing, education and workforce, and family economic security. Each of these pillars, built on the lived experience of our 160 member agencies and their responses to the needs of the families and individuals who come to them for aid, provides us a way of understanding proposals attempting to address the complex issue of poverty in our country.

In applying these principles to the public square, CCUSA has engaged in a variety of discussions and proposals about what the future of our nation's efforts to reduce poverty should look like. We will not back away from protecting those in need, but an unsustainable status quo that leaves 45 million Americans struggling to put food on their table or a roof over their head demands new ideas.

### **STORIES OF HOPE**

But before we can begin a conversation about meaningful reform that creates opportunity for those in need, many of our elected representatives and their staffs need to be told about the depth of the problem and to see the faces and hear the stories. We tell them about the factory worker who has been out of work for a year, the family on the verge of being torn apart by an unjust immigration system, the military veteran who slept on the streets because he had nowhere else to turn.

But we don't stop there — the power of our witness comes in describing the next step. That out-of-work factory employee? Thanks to a session with a counselor, he was able to pinpoint a new career with potential for advancement. The family facing deportation received legal assistance from a Catholic Charities program. The veteran has secured stable housing while he continues his recovery from addiction.

These are the stories of hope that often don't get told. These are the miracles that our agencies are working every day. And they are what influence our work as Catholic Charities USA to make sure they are not isolated incidents, but are being turned into policies and principles that can help everyone seeking a better life gain a pathway out of poverty.

Service and advocacy — the two go hand-in-hand, and having only one without the other is an incomplete expression of our call to be, as Pope Francis calls us to be, "a Church that is poor and for the poor."

Think you know Catholic Charities? Look deeper. I bet you'll be amazed at what you find.

**RON JACKSON** is senior director, government affairs, Catholic Charities USA, Alexandria, Va.

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