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News Release

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Catholic Charities USA Goes to Congress to Urge Action to Address Poverty—CCUSA President Holds Briefing on Hunger and Testifies to House Subcommittee as Agency Directors from Across the Country Meet with Members of Congress

Washington, DC—Catholic Charities USA took its *Campaign to Reduce Poverty in America* directly to Congress today, with a briefing on the struggles of 35 million Americans who experience hunger, testimony before a House Ways and Means subcommittee on poverty, and visits to Hill offices by local Catholic Charities agency leaders.

The concentrated day-long effort by Catholic Charities to focus attention on the need for action on poverty and hunger included a full-page ad in *Roll Call* and a virtual march on Washington in which people from around the country contacted their Members of Congress.

Today was the busiest single day of activity in the Catholic Charities Campaign to Reduce Poverty in America, which seeks to cut the U.S. poverty rate in half by 2020. The four main areas of the Campaign are improving food and nutrition programs, increasing access to health care, enabling more people to get affordable housing, and promoting greater economic security for the poor and vulnerable through programs that support work and strengthen families.

Hunger Briefing Features Baltimore Senior and Denver Grandmother of Three

At the congressional briefing on the persistence of hunger, Catholic Charities called on Congress to give a higher priority to helping those living with hunger to strengthen current federal nutrition programs to help reduce hunger and poverty in America. The briefing combined policy positions with personal stories about hunger, including comments from a senior from Baltimore and a Denver grandmother who is caring for three grandchildren.

“The moral test of society is how it ensures the needs of the most vulnerable, including those unable to provide adequate food to themselves and their families,” said Rev. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA. “It is unacceptable that in a nation as bountiful as ours that children, working adults, and senior citizens experience food shortages that puts their physical, mental, and developmental health at risk.

“Hunger is a growing problem for families in our community and our nation, a problem that Catholic Charities agencies witness each day, as 44 percent of the assistance provided by our agencies across the country deal with food and nutrition,” Father Snyder said.

In 2005, Catholic Charities agencies nationwide served more than 5 million people through their food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, and other food service programs. Those served in Catholic Charities soup kitchens has increased 27 percent since 2001, while clients served by food banks increased by almost 15 percent.

And the need for nutrition assistance across the country continues to rise, especially among low-income working families. For example, as many as 40 percent of the working poor must turn to emergency food to fight off hunger, and 29 percent of food stamp recipients are in families where at least one person works. Children and elderly and children are also impacted, as nearly 80 percent of food stamp recipients are children, and three in four Americans older than 65 experience difficulty meeting their daily food needs.

Father Snyder said that while Catholic Charities agencies continue to provide needed food for families, the organization is working to convince federal lawmakers to revise and improve nutrition programs.

“Federal nutrition assistance programs deliver essential food assistance to one in five Americans,” Father Snyder said. “Low-income individuals, families, children and seniors need these programs to lead productive lives. We need Congress to improve the Food Stamp Program in the upcoming farm bill to make the application process easier, increase benefit amounts, improve outreach, expand eligibility and eliminate asset limits.”

Testimony to Ways and Means Subcommittee Points to Need to Reduce Poverty

Following the hunger briefing, Father Snyder testified at a hearing conducted by the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support on proposals for reducing poverty.

Today more than 37 million Americans live in poverty. Catholic Charities agencies serve more than 7.4 million people each year, and local agencies are facing an increase in demand for emergency assistance, primarily among working families that are unable to make enough to provide for their basic needs.

“The existence of such widespread and long term poverty amidst such enormous wealth is a moral and social wound on the soul of our country. Even while the economy as a whole prospers,” Father Snyder testified.

“The many misconceptions about the nature of poverty in the United States reinforce the commonly held view that poverty is due to failures and deficiencies of individuals, rather than the failures of structures that we put in place through the economic and political choices we make as a nation,” he said. “While it is true that individual choices and behaviors do influence one’s chances of living in poverty, these individual behaviors are frequently outweighed by the structures and policies that shape the opportunities of people who are poor.”

In his testimony, Father Snyder said that government programs to help those living in poverty must be strengthened, and he called on Congress and the Administration to give a higher priority to the needs of society’s most vulnerable when making choices and decisions about policies and allocation of federal money. Specifically he encouraged members of the committee to support policies that:

- improve the TANF program to create more opportunities for low-income families;
- strengthen the federal commitment to children in the child welfare system;
- strengthen two parent families, by creating more comprehensive policies to support low-income fathers;
- improve the child care program;
- index the minimum wage to keep pace with inflation;
- bolster unemployment insurance to benefit more low-income workers; and
- promote long-term economic security and asset building.

According to Father Snyder, Catholic Charities USA is committed to a long-term effort to reduce poverty in America, but we need Congress, the Administration, and the American people to join in the effort. “Catholic Charities agencies have had a long history of serving and advocating on behalf of those who live in poverty. We will continue to fight for policy changes that provide more opportunities for more Americans. We believe we must cut poverty in half to make our county whole,” he said.