

# Deep poverty can be reversed, Catholic Charities USA president says

CLEVELAND - One-time industrial powerhouses such as Cleveland that have been hit hard by a long-term economic downturn can still see significant declines in poverty as long as appropriate measures are enacted by the federal government, the president of Catholic Charities USA said.

Addressing the eighth in a series of regional leadership summits to discuss poverty as part of Catholic Charities USA's centennial celebration April 22, Father Larry Snyder said steps to provide affordable housing, encourage hiring, enact living wage laws and increase access to food, nutrition programs and health care are needed to lower the country's 13.2 percent poverty rate.

Cleveland, which has topped the list of the nation's poorest cities twice since 2003, was targeted by Catholic Charities USA for one of the summits because of its many community-based programs involving poor and unemployed people.

The summits are part of the agency's nationwide campaign to cut poverty in half by 2020. Previous summits have occurred in St. Paul, Minn.; Portland, Ore.; San Antonio; San Jose, Calif.; Atlanta; Albany, N.Y.; and Nashville, Tenn. Three more are planned, including April 29 in Chicago, June 17 in Newark, N.J., and Sept. 25 in Washington.

Information gathered at the summits will be used to promote legislation "that will give communities the tools and resources to reduce poverty in areas such as affordable housing, employment and living wages, adequate food and nutrition and access to health care," Father Snyder told the gathering of civic leaders, government officials and about 200 church representatives from Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Indiana.

"You may ask why we have the audacity to undertake such an initiative," Father

Snyder said. "My response is that we do it because we have no choice."

As a member of the President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, Father Snyder said he has seen how individuals can make a difference in the lives of poor people. He called on the audience to take steps to "dramatically change our country's approach to helping the most vulnerable populations among us" and "envision strategies that will have a direct and significant impact in reducing the number of children and families for whom poverty is the context of their everyday lives."

Father Snyder also said that while the current economic recession has been challenging, Catholic Charities is focused on reducing the causes of poverty while remaining committed to supporting local programs that have proven to be successful.

"You can ask the question: Why should we make this a priority?" Father Snyder said. "As Americans, I believe we should have the political will to do this because it speaks loudly and clearly to what kind of society we aspire to be. Millions of Americans are counting on us to change the trajectory that we are on and find a bridge out of poverty for them.

"For while we need to talk about statistics and poverty measurements, let us never ultimately take our sights off the faces of the individuals who need our help," he added.

During an interview with the Catholic Universe Bulletin, the Cleveland diocesan newspaper, Father Snyder said he was inspired by several of the comments of local leaders in the poverty fight. He cited the Building Health Communities program, which works with the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine Health System to plan health screenings for poor residents in Cleveland's Central neighborhood, one of the city's poorest.

One of its projects finds city residents growing fruits and vegetables on vacant city lots and selling them to employees at nearby St. Vincent Charity Hospital, operated by the health system.

He said the ideas mentioned during the Cleveland summit echoed those discussed around the country at other summits.

Catholic Charities USA is also developing what Father Snyder called a National Consumer Advisory Board, a group of people who have received social services from Catholic Charities agencies. Their expertise will be tapped to better understand the services that individuals and families need.

“We have to get in partnership with communities,” he said. “This is not a Catholic Charities project alone. It’s everybody.”

Leonard Calabrese, president of Catholic Community Connection, a collaboration of Catholic ministries in health care, senior living, education and human services, pointed to the Deaf Access Program as an example of how such partnerships can work. The program brings members of Cleveland’s deaf community together in a wide-ranging effort to improve access to health care, transportation and human services.

“We not only must work together but include the voices of those affected by poverty,” Calabrese told a break-out session during the summit.

J. Thomas Mullen, president and chief executive officer of Catholic Charities Health and Human Services of the Cleveland Diocese, told the gathering that cutting poverty in half in a place such as Cleveland will be a challenge because of the city’s status as one of the poorest in the country. The problems are compounded by the city’s 10.6 percent unemployment rate and a massive number of home foreclosures.

Where Mullen becomes optimistic is in the participation and passion of people throughout the diocese as well as Northeast Ohio who are beginning to understand that communities must work together to end poverty.

“Cleveland is a great community,” he said. “We’ve got a lot of committed people here.”