A Renewed Focus on Poverty’s Root Causes

By: Bill Sinclair, Executive Director, Catholic Charities of Tennessee

Social service agencies often deal with a common misperception that assumes that most, if not all, of the services provided are for the poor, essentially “safety net” services. Granted, Catholic Charities of Tennessee does provide “safety net” services through programs such as Loaves and Fishes Community Meals for the Hungry and North Nashville Outreach. For some of our neighbors, we truly are a stop of last resort.

Today, though, more of our focus is on providing opportunities which can eventually lead those currently living in poverty out.

According to Metropolitan Social Services of Nashville/Davidson County, 19.3% of the county’s residents are living in poverty. The Tennessee rate is 18.3%; nationally it is 15.9%.

Spurred by Catholic Charities USA’s Campaign to Reduce Poverty and Nashville Mayor Karl Dean’s similar local initiative, Catholic Charities of Tennessee, in recent years, has embarked on a major effort to dedicate resources to specifically address the root causes of poverty, including lack of training, lack of education, poor health, and unbalanced diets.

Our Job Training Center, established in April 2011 by the Family Assistance and Community Employment department, is one example. It provides temporary (90-120 days) modestly paid employment opportunities with meaningful “light manufacturing” work to area unemployed and dislocated workers.

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The critical skills or resources Anais Riggs offers through Family Assistance and Community Employment. Riggs’ motivation, however, is unswerving.

“Each week, I know that I am changing someone’s life. Little by little, step by step. I know I am doing my best to make a positive impact.”

Riggs admits that being on the front line is challenging, especially when balancing services she can provide against funding pressures.

“It is hard to say ‘No.’ when the person is in front of you and you know that they need help. How can I do that? How can I say no? How can I deny services, reflecting on her computer/Science-oriented college education.

Employee Spotlight

Anais Riggs

“It was an awakening on how we can all make a positive difference in someone else’s life.”

Over time, her responsibilities expanded to include the Learning and Nurturing pre-kindergarten readiness program, the Maternal Infant Health Outreach Worker (MIHOW) program to improve maternal and infant health outcomes in underserved communities, women’s support groups, computer classes, and case management.

“Riggs’ 100+ clients – young children preparing to start school, their parents, expectant mothers, and non-English speaking women with limited education and family support – all benefit from the same philosophy. ‘Everything we do in our programs is focused on giving people guidance and, therefore, the opportunities.’

“Every person has the ability to achieve success; many of our clients are challenged in their efforts, though, due to a lack of family support and limited resources.”

CHAP (Creating Hope by Assisting Parents) of Middle Tennessee has embarked on a major effort to dedicate resources to specifically address the root causes of poverty, including lack of training, lack of education, poor health, and unbalanced diets.

Eileen Behan, Social Services director.

“In south Nashville and Bedford County, our staff will be sharing ideas with parents whose primary language is Spanish,” she said.

“Elsewhere in south Nashville, with translator and space support from Metro Nashville Public Schools, seven Arabic-speaking families are meeting for six weeks to share their questions and learn about parenting.”

CHAP has worked with families in Middle Tennessee for more than 20 years to learn about and use strategies that ultimately support families.

All families have strengths. Our gifted staff members help to build on these by enhancing parents’ ways of nurturing, increasing knowledge of child development, better understanding their own resilience, social connections, and support, and, finally, appreciating their children’s social and emotional support system.
Refugee Elders Excel

Mention elders and, for some, images develop of older people whiling away their time in rocking chairs, reliving days gone by.

The Catholic Charities of Tennessee Refugee Elders group proves clearly that this image is far from reality. Since the program’s 2006 inception, learning and community involvement opportunities have grown significantly.

Refugee Elders was established to offer resettled refugees age 50 and over peer interaction, stimulation and English-language skills via social gatherings. Since then, community partnerships have been established to increase focus on physical and emotional wellness activities.

“A typical month for Elders is fairly busy,” explained Andrea Prince, Refugee Elders specialist. “With our various program offerings, Elder clients may be involved with staff and volunteers for close to 6 – 8 hours weekly.”

“They attend Citizenship and English-language classes three hours a week and then participate in a host of community activities,” added Prince.

Monthly activities include yoga classes with the Vanderbilt Coalition for Healthy Aging, Fifty Forward Knowles Center visits for exercise and bingo, Farmers’ Market trips, Frist Center art projects, and bi-annual health screenings through Vanderbilt/AmeriCorps.

Exemplifying the determination of this resilient group, three program participants, including Nejatollah Derakhshani, a 69 year-old Iranian refugee, achieved their personal goal of passing their citizenship test over the past year.

“Passing the very hard test made me very, very happy and my family very proud,” said Nejatollah who took the test several times before finally passing. This persevering gentleman is now a proud U.S. citizen!

With a new grant from the Tennessee Office for Refugees to expand the program’s case management and focus on citizenship, more Elders should be following in Nejatollah’s footsteps.

The Elders program could not provide such a diverse range of activities without the help of dedicated volunteers who not only help transport, but more importantly, build great friendships with participants.

To enrich your life by volunteering in this program, please contact Aaron Toran at (615) 248-5989 or atoran@cctenn.org.

Pathways to Possibilities Luncheon Set for May 9

Pathways to Possibilities, a first-of-its-kind fundraising luncheon for Catholic Charities of Tennessee, will be held at the Button Hotel (1808 West End Avenue) on May 9, 2013 from 12 to 1 p.m.

More than 300 guests, some new friends and others long-time supporters of the agency, will learn about the broad range of services Catholic Charities provides to those in need in our community.

“Many in Middle Tennessee, both Catholics and non-Catholics alike, are simply not aware of the tremendous jewel we have here in Catholic Charities,” explained Chris Donnelly, a member of Catholic Charities’ Board of Trustees and chair of the Board’s Development Committee.

“They do not comprehend all of the different services the agency provides, understand how the agency’s operation is funded, or even realize that it is a small portion of the annual operating budget which actually comes from the Catholic community.”

“We rely heavily on the generosity of donors and more than 4,000 volunteers to help us touch the nearly 70,000 lives we currently connect with over the course of a year,” added Paul Ney, president of the Board of Trustees.

Catholic Charities helps people in need – regardless of race, religion, age, or ethnic background – find a suitable and appropriate path to a better life through more than 40 programs offered at locations throughout Middle Tennessee.

“Everyone’s journey is unique,” said Ney. “Through acts of love, goodwill and kindness, we support those seeking a guiding hand and provide pathways to possibilities.”

To join us at this fundraising luncheon or receive sponsorship information, please contact Laura Jumonville at (615) 760-1014 or ljumonville@cctenn.org.

FACE Director Honored

There is a star among the ranks at Catholic Charities of Tennessee. Megan Stack, Family Assistance and Community Employment (FACE) director, was recently named one of Nashville’s “best and brightest rising rock stars in business” by the Nashville Business Journal as part of the 2013 Forty Under 40 class. She was recognized at a special ceremony on March 13th.

Stack oversees several of the agency’s programs including Leaves and Fisher’s Community Meals for the Hungry, North Nashville Outreach, Hispanic Family Services, and the Job Training Center. She also manages twice-monthly perishable food distributions offered in partnership with Second Harvest Food Bank.

“We are so grateful to have Megan as part of our management team,” said Bill Sinclair, Catholic Charities executive director. “Her dedication to her programs and their clients is amazing to watch. She embodies our motto of ‘Acts of Love, Goodwill and Kindness’ each and every day.”

Stack started her career at Catholic Charities in 2005 as an intern while pursuing a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Tennessee. She was appointed to the staff full-time shortly after graduation in 2006.

“We are pleased to be able to identify these rising stars like Megan Stack,” explained Kate Herman, the President and Publisher of the Nashville Business Journal. “These honorees are tomorrow’s community leaders.”

LifeSavers Campaign Benefits Pregnancy Counseling

Caring Choices, Catholic Charities’ pregnancy counseling program, will be conducting its annual LifeSavers campaign at area parishes on the weekend after Mother’s Day, May 18-19.

“Donations help us to provide free counseling to families experiencing a crisis pregnancy,” explained Adoption and Pregnancy Counseling director Donna Thomas.

“The funding also supports efforts to provide material assistance in the form of diapers, wipes, blankets, and baby clothing to families that have chosen life.”

For more information on the LifeSavers campaign, contact Scott Gubala at sgubala@cctenn.org or 615-760-1025.

Wish List

ADOPTION AND PREGNANCY COUNSELING
- Wipes, diapers, gift cards for Walmart, Kroger and/or Target

ADULT DAY PROGRAM
- Durable living room chairs with arms, donations for new games and supplies, AID devices, pet visits, daytime volunteers

CHILD WELFARE
- Art supplies for play and art therapy including: bubbles in small individual sizes, Play-Doh in small individual sizes, individual paint sets, basic Legos®, journals, small miniature toys

JOB TRAINING CENTER
- Packaging tape, scissors, large black Sharpie® markers, first aid supplies

LOAVES AND FISHES
- Ball caps, t-shirts, coffee mugs, towels, large plastic cutting boards, socks

NORTH NASHVILLE OUTREACH
- Paper towels, toilet paper, soap, shampoo, personal care items

REFUGEE SERVICES
- Desperately need volunteers for Refugee Youth Program in Smyrna!

REFUGEE SERVICES
- Personal care products (shampoo, bar soap, toothpaste)

REFUGEE SERVICES
- Household cleaning supplies (dish soap, Comet® or Ajax®, laundry detergent, working vacuums)

REFUGEE SERVICES
- Kitchen goods (dishes, pot, pans, flatware, soap, toothpaste, tables, small chests of drawers)

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New Year, New Life

Traditionally, Refugee Services hosts arrivals of the prior 12 months at a party celebrating the start of the new year in their new community. “New Year, New Beginnings” was the theme for the party held in early January in cooperation with Loews Vanderbilt Hotel which provided the party space and food. Approximately 200 refugees from ten countries were present for the celebration.

(Photos by Mattie Callahan)

Local Staff National Input

Five Catholic Charities of Tennessee Staffers are currently doing “double duty” attending to agency responsibilities here, while also contributing nationally.

Donna Gann, Immigration Support Services coordinator, has served on the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC) Diocesan Advisory Committee since 2003. This committee meets quarterly to provide advice and feedback on the full range of training, support, and programmatic activities CLINIC offers to affiliate members. It also provides input on key issues diocesan programs face, whether legal or programmatic.

One of the biggest benefits for Gann is that “I feel that I have a voice!” A secondary benefit “The problems I have with the immigration system are not mine alone.” Several of her processes here have been recommended by CLINIC as “best practices” to other programs around the country.

“Being a member of this committee has helped me represent my clients with more knowledge on how to facilitate the system to work to their advantage,” Gann continued.

“I now have the resources to help me with more complicated cases and fulfill the clients’ needs.”

Others staffers serving on Professional Interest Sections steering teams tied to Catholic Charities USA are: Eileen Beehan, Social Services director, Aging Adult Network

Kellye Branson, Refugee Services and Immigration Services director, Newcomers Integration

Megan Stack, Family Assistance and Community Employment director, Asset Development

Mark Barry, Marketing director, Development/Communications

The CLUSA teams typically meet twice a year in person, with one of those meetings taking place at CLUSA’s Annual Gathering in September. There are also numerous conference calls over the course of a year and time spent on committee work, often after the business day has ended.

From Facebook:

“Catholic Charities of Nashville has been instrumental in the filing, processing and ultimately the issuing of my permanent residence card. Throughout this demanding journey, Donna Gann has helped me navigate through this daunting process. I highly doubt that I would have been able to undertake this and maintain my sanity without the help of Catholic Charities.” Odene, client since 2009, as posted on the agency’s Facebook page.
Advocacy Efforts

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underemployed residents.

More than 100 individuals have completed the program; a majority of these have moved on to more permanent, higher paying jobs in the local job market. The program is moving ever closer to financial sustainability, a key requirement for its long-term viability.

Several area employers, in a host of industries, consider our Refugee Services program as a go-to source for fast learning, high performing, and loyal employees with a strong work ethic.

When hired, our refugee clients are ready to work, having benefited greatly from services such as English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, interview and job search preparation, key workplace skills training, and financial literacy. Tennessee Office for Refugees promotes similar initiatives throughout the state.

Hispanic Family Services has developed a similar reputation for producing well-prepared clients, providing a host of programs focused on English language speaking skills, education, and physical wellness. Its educational offerings are available to all ages, from youngsters preparing to enter Pre-Kindergarten (Learning & Nurturing) to older students wishing to resume an educational track put on hold many years prior (Plaza Comunitaria).

According to Metro Social Services, Tennessee ranked 8th highest for food hardship among all states. In Davidson County alone, 131,000+ people receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (“SNAP”) benefits (aka “food stamps”).

Working with Second Harvest Food Bank of Middle Tennessee, we transfer 120 tons of perishable food annually to low income areas of the city. With our twice monthly distributions, we help our neighbors stretch their food budgets and, at the same time, include healthier – and frequently less affordable – items (such as fruits, vegetables, and dairy goods) in their diets.

Although still providing safety nets, our focus for the future is on enabling people to work their way out of poverty.