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Bishops attend Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Nov. 14, 2022, on the first day of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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Citing financial reasons, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at its upcoming spring meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, may be looking to revamp or significantly scale back the [Catholic Campaign for Human Development](#), the bishops' domestic anti-poverty program that for decades has been a popular target of criticism from far-right Catholic groups.

The bishops this spring will not be renewing or approving any grant applications for the campaign's 2024-2025 grant cycle because of "significantly reduced numbers" for the program's annual national collection, which normally coincides with the World Day of the Poor in November.

"This is not a decision made lightly. CCHD is taking this moment of pause as an opportunity to re-evaluate and renew the mission and resources of CCHD to strengthen this work for another 50 years," a Catholic Campaign for Human Development official notified grant applicants in a May 31 email obtained by NCR.

"We do not know what the precise future of CCHD will hold, but we know that this work to address poverty and transform our communities must continue," the official also wrote.

Social service groups and nonprofit organizations that since the campaign's founding in 1969 have used grant funds to support environmental justice efforts, organize immigrant workers and lobby for affordable housing, among other community-level initiatives, [have written letters](#) to the conference and to individual bishops in recent weeks highlighting the program's success stories in an effort to prevent the U.S. Catholic Church from retreating in its advocacy for systemic social justice reforms.



Auxiliary Bishop Andrzej Zglejszewski of Rockville Centre, New York, looks over paperwork during a Nov. 15, 2023, session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. At its upcoming spring 2024 meeting, the conference may revamp or scale back the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

"Pausing grant awards or the annual collection for even one year would cause irreparable harm to the poorest and most marginalized communities in this country," said Fr. Guillermo Treviño Jr., co-president of Escucha Mi Voz Iowa, a faith-based, immigrant-led community organization that has used the bishops' campaign funds to lobby against a deportation law and anti-immigration bills at the Iowa state legislature.

Treviño, [the recipient](#) of the bishops' conference's 2022 Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award for his anti-poverty advocacy on behalf of his Latino parishioners, told NCR in a prepared statement that he believes the Catholic Campaign for Human Development is "under attack because it is a successful anti-poverty program" that works to empower local marginalized communities, an effort he described as being

"essential to the social mission of the church."



Fr. Guillermo Treviño, 2022 recipient of the annual Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CNS/Courtesy of Guillermo Treviño)

Said Treviño, who is also a pastor of two churches in Iowa that serve meatpacking plant communities: "From Texas to Iowa, CCHD-funded groups give voice to the voiceless and are at the forefront of the struggle to protect and defend religious freedom and the human dignity of immigrants, workers, children and families."

According to [a press advisory](#) the U.S. bishops' conference issued ahead of its June 12-14 gathering in Louisville, the prelates will also be receiving updates on the Synod of Bishops on Synodality, as well as the National Eucharistic Revival and the National Eucharistic Congress, which is scheduled to be held July 17-21 in Indianapolis.

The bishops in Louisville will also vote on agenda items related to liturgical texts and new pastoral frameworks for youth, young adult and Indigenous ministries. In addition, the conference's migration committee is expected to present on the church's recent engagement on an issue that has become even more politicized in the present election year.

Regarding the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the conference's press advisory said that the prelates in 2023 initiated a review to "renew the mandate and mission" of their program that was [created to address poverty's root causes](#) by investing in local programs that help empower people and their communities.

"The bishops will spend time prayerfully discussing the best way to adapt to the post-pandemic needs and resources, while at the same time continuing a steadfast commitment to helping the poor and disenfranchised emerge from the cycle of poverty," the advisory said.

The review and potential overhaul of the campaign, which for years has been [accused by right-wing Catholics](#) of funding Marxist-inspired social justice groups that advocate for issues like abortion rights and LGBTQ causes, is a [familiar storyline](#) for longtime observers of the U.S. Catholic Church.

[Related: Bishop: CCHD brings Gospel to struggling communities](#)

"It's almost like deja vu all over again," said Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, a journalist who has covered the bishops' conference for decades. Reese mentioned how the right-wing-fueled controversies over the program prompted the bishops' conference [in 2010 to adopt new safeguards](#) to ensure grant recipients' adherence to Catholic principles.

"This seems to happen every 10 years," Reese said. "The bishops' conference always ends up setting up a committee of bishops to review the organizations that are involved. They end up looking at it and decide that except in a few cases, everything's fine."

But the bishops' conference's 2010 review that implemented new safeguards, including additional layers of screening and grant application language that affirms "[Basic Principles of Catholic Mission](#)" for the campaign, did not mollify the program's conservative critics.

Over the years, conservative U.S. Catholics have accused the Catholic Campaign for Human Development of ignoring its reforms. Right-wing Catholic groups have periodically conducted their own self-styled investigations purportedly showing links with groups they allege advocate for positions at odds with Catholic social and moral teachings.

[Related: Report: Conservatives' attacks threaten bishops' anti-poverty organization](#)

More recently, a little more than two dozen right-wing Catholic groups and activists, including personalities such as traditionalist podcaster Taylor Marshall and conservative political operative [Deal Hudson](#), [have signed an open letter](#) urging the bishops to permanently shut down the campaign.

"I think there is the effect of the propaganda against CCHD that started more than a decade ago," said Massimo Faggioli, a Villanova University theologian and church historian.



Massimo Faggioli is professor of historical theology at Villanova University.
(CNS/Chaz Muth)

For scholars who study the ideological currents roiling the Catholic Church in the United States, the fact that the U.S. bishops are considering scaling back their social justice, anti-poverty program speaks to the divide between Pope Francis' view of the Catholic Church in society and how leading conservative American bishops understand the church's role in safeguarding difficult moral teachings in a modern secular culture.

"But it's not just about the bishops," Faggioli told NCR. "The question is where influential groups of militant Catholic culture in the USA are going theologically.

There is a history of attacks against CCHD that reveals an ignorance about the moral teaching of the Catholic Church about cooperation with non-Catholic organizations."

In recent years, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, the bishops' conference's press advisory said that the Catholic Campaign for Human Development maintained its level of support for those in need, "despite a decline in donations."

In 2022, [the most recent year for which information is publicly available](#), the campaign operated at a \$5.7 million deficit, spending about half of the \$17 million it had in net assets at the beginning of the year to award about \$12.7 million to 192 grant recipients, despite only taking in about \$9.2 million in total revenue that year. Accounting for promotional costs, as well as fundraising and programming expenses, the organization reported about \$15 million in total expenses for 2022.

According to the campaign's other annual financial reports, which the bishops' conference provided to NCR, the program has seen total revenues drop from \$18.14 million in 2017 to a little more than \$9 million in 2022, even while total expenses fluctuated between \$13 million and \$22 million over the same period.



Pope Francis holds his regular spring meeting with the officers of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops April 18 in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican. Seated from the left are: Fr. Michael J.K. Fuller, general secretary; Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore, vice president; Archbishop Timothy Broglio, president and head of the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services; and Fr. Paul B.R. Hartmann, associate general secretary. (CNS/Vatican Media)

In 2017, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development reported almost \$48.5 million in net assets, most of that held in a reserve fund that has since been drawn down to the point that the program reported having about \$8.4 million in net assets by the end of 2022.

In November 2020, during the pandemic, the campaign's national collection took in \$4 million, a steep 57% drop-off from the \$9.5 million the previous year's collection raised. Other collections that year also dropped off by more than 50% because of church closings and Mass attendance restrictions.

Similar to the Catholic Campaign for Human Development's collection, those for the bishops' conference's other initiatives, including the collections for retired religious, home missions, Latin America and Catholic communication have still not bounced back to pre-pandemic levels, according to an analysis of those collections' financial information.

The May 31 email that an official sent to grant applicants mentioned the program's "significantly reduced numbers," while the conference's press advisory said the prelates had "begun the process of discerning the next 50 years."

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But while the bishops' conference described the campaign's finances in straightforward terms of reduced national collections and rising expenditures, an analysis of the program's annual reports, operational model and the conference's accountability measures present a more complicated picture.

For example, in 2022, the national collection for the Catholic Campaign for Human Development saw a \$2 million increase from the previous year, when the program

reported a little more than \$6 million in collections. The approximately \$8.2 million that the 2022 national collection generated is comparable to pre-pandemic collections that brought in between \$8 million and \$10 million from 2017 to 2019.

Richard Wood, a former unpaid adviser to the U.S. bishops' conference on its anti-poverty program, told NCR that the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, with the approval of the conference, a few years ago began spending down the money in its reserve fund to "fund the good work being done in dioceses across the country."

"A decision was made that it didn't make sense for an anti-poverty program to hold a large amount of money in reserve," said Wood, the president of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of Southern California.

Wood, who studies faith-based community organizing, added: "There are very few things in America that bring together people across economic lines, across racial lines and across faith lines in a shared work for the common good and to defend human dignity. That's what CCHD does."



An usher uses a collection basket during the offertory portion of the Mass in this file photo from April 16, 2023. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

"The CCHD collection has always done well," said Patrick Markey, a former bishops' conference official and former managing partner of the Leadership Roundtable, a church management consulting firm that works closely with church leaders in the United States.

In the last seven years, not counting for the pandemic in 2020, the largest single-year drop the organization reported in total revenues was a \$6.7 million dropoff in 2018, when the program brought in \$11.4 million. In 2017, the campaign reported \$18.1 million in total revenues, but the program that year received more than \$4.5 million in additional grants and bequests.

In comparison, the 2018 national collection was only \$1.5 million less than the previous year. In the 2019 national collection, Catholic Campaign for Human Development actually received more than \$300,000 more than it received the previous year.

"The only way to kill off CCHD would be to kill the collection," Reese said.

As for the program's expenditures, not only can a grant application not be approved without the local bishop's endorsement, but every June the conference's Catholic Campaign for Human Development subcommittee reviews applications before approving them and setting the program's budget.

The bishops' conference's financial and administrative structures authorize the program's expenditures. The bishops' Budget and Finance Committee is also the only entity that can approve requests to withdraw money from the campaign's long-term reserve fund.

Despite its collection tanking during the pandemic in 2020, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development that year still distributed \$18.9 million in grants and donations to help local organizations stabilize families at-risk of losing their homes and to provide other forms of relief.

"That's a good news story," Markey said. "That is a moment when you help people out, and that's when CCHD stepped up and helped people out."

Despite the negative publicity that he often dealt with over the years, John Carr, a longtime executive at the bishops' conference who oversaw the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, told NCR that he does not think about money or controversy when discussing the program.

"I think about farm workers being treated with greater dignity," Carr said. "I think of people in rural communities who now have indoor plumbing, Latino neighborhoods that finally get their fair share of sitting resources and women who are building businesses that offer some dignity for themselves and their families."

Said Carr, "That's the story of CCHD."

This story appears in the **USCCB Spring Assembly 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)