



DAI leaders and organizers meet with Dallas police commanders, including then-chief U. Renee Hall, following a meeting at DPD headquarters.

## The Post-Pandemic Path Ahead

BY BETH GRIFFIN

When COVID-19 spread across the United States, the pandemic and its attendant state-by-state restrictions challenged the operations of grassroots organizations—but it also provided new opportunities for outreach and collaboration.

Three groups funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) strengthened their networks during the pandemic and developed innovative strategies that will likely persist after the virus is controlled.

### Virtual Networks Expand Outreach to People with Disabilities

In the best of times, people who live with disabilities, whether visible or less visible, face hurdles unfamiliar to the general population. During the pandemic, many have become more isolated and reliant on a shrinking group of caregivers.

Karolyn Campbell is the executive director of the **Disabled Rights Action Committee (DRAC)**, a CCHD-funded group in Salt Lake City. “We do a lot of work to get folks out of nursing

homes and help them live safely and independently with the people who love them. With COVID, we have balanced the safety issues of our members with their need to have access to caregivers and support services,” she says.

“Because so many folks with disabilities live below the poverty level or are in the high-risk categories, we initially gathered and distributed personal protective equipment using a contactless delivery through Amazon,” Karolyn adds.

DRAC also joined other local organizations to create a local support network to distribute emergency cash assistance. “It sprang up almost overnight,” she says. “We were blown away by the resourcefulness of people and their ability to rise to meet the challenge.”

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Through the CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD

across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, the CCHD has contributed over \$400 million to nearly 12,000 low-income led, community-based projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.

## LETTER FROM



## THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends:

I had hoped the pandemic would be a memory at this point, but perhaps I was too optimistic. In general, I am fortunate that optimism comes easily, despite the natural temptation to wallow in despair these days.

As the director of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), I am surrounded by people and organizations whose creativity and tenacity are awe-inspiring. I am humbled to listen to leaders of our funded groups describe their painstaking work to promote dignity and to champion justice. Because of the coronavirus, they have developed new skills to add to an already formidable tool kit.

When the pandemic hit, many of our funded organizations took a deep breath and pivoted to deal with the emergency head-on. They listened to the people they serve and tried to meet their most pressing needs. People accustomed to face-to-face interactions, house meetings, and huge community organizing events took to Zoom, FaceTime, and other virtual platforms to connect with members, reimagine events, and plan for the future.

This issue of *Helping People Help Themselves* looks at three CCHD-funded groups that took stock of the unique situation and their specific capacities, and determined how to stay safe and true to their mission in a changed world. Each has drawn on core strengths—developed with the help of CCHD—to meet new challenges. Members of the Disabled Rights Action Committee (DRAC) in Salt Lake City, Utah—already accustomed to advocating both in person and from a distance—celebrated the near-universal acceptance of working from home. And at Dallas Area Interfaith (DAI) in Texas, member parishes and congregations tapped into their existing, painstakingly built structure and communications network to reach out to the isolated and needy. Finally, the Ezekiel Project in Saginaw, Michigan, welcomed a CCHD-funded staff member at the exact time when they began to sharply refocus on their planned advocacy for free and fair education funding.

As the leaders note, the pandemic has lifted a veil on poverty and exposed

weaknesses in the system. It has also offered CCHD a renewed opportunity to answer the Gospel call to seek justice for the oppressed and to break the cycle of poverty in this country. The nimble, thoughtful response of our funded groups to this cruel pandemic is a source of my optimism.

However, like so many organizations at this time, CCHD's own resources are severely strained by increased demands. We are trying to respond to funded groups that are continuing their good work while meeting new pandemic-related challenges in their communities. But it's tough. The bulk of our budget comes from an annual collection taken up in parishes. Of course, fewer parishioners are attending church in person these days, so the money we get from the collection is drastically reduced. Thank God, the collection funds are supplemented with generous donations from readers of this newsletter.

Please know how grateful I am for your prayers for and support of our critical work.

**RALPH MCLOUD**, Director  
*Catholic Campaign for Human Development*



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Father Salvador Guzman addresses parishioners at St. Pius X in Dallas about the value of parish IDs and the importance of trusting police officers in a meeting hosted by DAI.



Fr. Jesus Belmontes, pastor at San Juan Diego in Dallas, assists with weekly food distribution that DAI helped to expand to city-wide locations to meet growing demand resulting from the pandemic.

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Advocacy is a huge element of DRAC's work, and the group moved its efforts to virtual platforms. "We've met with one of our senators virtually to lobby for an initiative that will give people with disabilities who qualify for supportive services the right to receive them in their home or another place of their choosing. We believe they should have more agency to make those decisions," Karolyn says. "It's a program that is more humane, cost effective, and keeps people with their families."

Karolyn says that DRAC moved its celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act online, which had the effect of multiplying the usual attendance. "Instead of attracting 200 or 300 people to our usual July community event, we transitioned to Facebook Live and reached more than 10,000 viewers," she says. In the future, DRAC hopes to offer meetings and events in person while including a virtual element to reach those unable to attend.

A silver lining to the pandemic is the widespread understanding that people can work from home effectively: a long-standing position advocated by people with disabilities. "We hope people will continue to see virtual connectivity as a legitimate way of interaction," Karolyn says.

DRAC has strengthened old relationships and built new ones during the pandemic. "There is also new diversity in our group, and we want to address the needs of people with different types of disabilities,"

says DRAC board chair Psarah Johnson. "People are stepping up to help each other, and I think we will come out of this stronger than ever."

### Working with Parishes to Address Critical Needs

Josephine Lopez Paul, lead organizer of the CCHD-funded **Dallas Area Interfaith (DAI)**, says, "You can't mobilize what you have not organized." When the pandemic hit, DAI parish and church leaders made phone calls to congregants to assess their needs. "Out of those calls, we organized a strategy to address food insecurity, job loss, and rent issues," she says. DAI has worked with Catholic Charities in Dallas to deliver food through parishes to 8,000 families each week. It has also urged city and county governments to draw down and distribute timely rental assistance money available through the federal CARES Act.

A unique Dallas-area parish ID program, developed three years ago, has helped undocumented people access COVID-19 testing and credit union services. The identity cards issued by Catholic parishes are accepted by seven local police jurisdictions. "It has become a way to recognize that these people who do not have government IDs are connected to a large institution that knows them. It's building the Church, and it's a beautiful thing," Josephine says.

Auxiliary Bishop Gregory Kelly of Dallas agrees. "The parish ID creates a sense

of belonging. People can say, 'This is my parish,' and they know they are not second-class or camping out."

"The pandemic has lifted a veil," Josephine says. "The number of people who are living in poverty" is in our face, she says. "The need is there. You can't ignore it. Poverty is not a secret in our city anymore."

She adds, "DAI's approach is still rooted in relationship, and that hasn't changed. Clergy and leaders have been there for one another as part of a community." DAI is an affiliate of the West/Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). It has 33 congregational members with approximately 300 active leaders.

DAI conducts weekly virtual meetings for clergy to share concerns and potential solutions. At one meeting early in the crisis, a pastor reported that half of 30 participants contracted COVID-19 after an unmasked choir practice. In response, celebrants of the weekly televised Mass from the diocesan cathedral began to use the final minute of the broadcast to urge compliance with masking and social-distancing recommendations.

Like others, DAI has moved many activities, such as organizing and training programs, online. Josephine says this will continue beyond the pandemic, so that "imagination and vision" can be shared with isolated participants in rural areas, as well as with those who can attend in person.

"Our DAI strength is in the Spanish-speaking immigrant community,"

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DRAC board members meet with a member of Mitt Romney's staff in March 2020.  
From left to right: Psarah Johnson, Karolyn Campbell, Lopeti Penima'ani, Mande Grant, and Ron Faerber.



Face masks and hand sanitizer distributed by DRAC to high-risk Utahns in poverty.  
Inset: The DRAC ADA Rental Kit in use at a community event in June 2020

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Josephine says. DAI is helping the county health department to get its message about controlling the pandemic into the community. "Immigrants trust the institution of the parish, and if you reach them through the parish, they will trust the message," she says.

**“Coronavirus exposed the weaknesses of our systems but provided us with a beacon of opportunity to go toward.”**

Similarly, Josephine says, DAI is helping connect its members to credit unions. "We want to help people get away from payday lenders. We're afraid they are incurring incredible debt in this crisis and will get further indebted if we can't get them assistance," she says.

"DAI works through local pastors to uphold the dignity of people so they can enact their own agency," Bishop Kelly says. "Their leadership skills are impressive, and pastors have found them very helpful."

"They [DAI] build relationships with the community," he says. Referring to the parish ID program, Bishop Kelly adds, "The police want to be able to protect and

serve the whole community, and they can't do that if part of the community is afraid of them."

Throughout the pandemic, DAI has maintained its momentum advocating for voter involvement, workers' rights, and housing reform.

### Reimagining Resiliency

"Reimagine is my mantra these days," says Jessica Hernandez, executive director of the CCHD-funded **Ezekiel Project** in Saginaw, Michigan. "There has been a lot of despair this year but also some great moments and opportunities to grow and call on God."

"The Ezekiel Project planned to focus its attention on a statewide ballot initiative on education," Jessica explains. "When the COVID-19 shutdown occurred, and we couldn't be outside collecting signatures, our hands were tied. So we had to reimagine what we would do if we had full and fair funding for education and [then] determine how we could get there."

"Coronavirus exposed the weaknesses of our systems but provided us with a beacon of opportunity to go toward," Jessica says.

She and her colleagues at the interfaith, congregation-based Ezekiel Project engaged in intentional conversations and helped others understand the importance of systemic change. "We spoke with people from our community

who currently have children in the public education system and [with] those who do not to discuss what we can do to have the educational future we want," she says.

The Ezekiel Project has worked with other faith-based groups to coordinate pandemic food drives. It has also deployed leadership and used social media and its website to provide information and resource navigation for small businesses and the faith-based community. "It was all hands on deck," Jessica says, "and individuals had to pull together and reach out of their comfort zones."

"Going forward, we will hold on to the positivity and resiliency we developed. The Holy Spirit assured me this would be a year of growth. We will realign, refocus, and be laser-focused on our progress," she says.

Deacon Librado Gayton, director of Hispanic Ministry for the Diocese of Saginaw, says of the Ezekiel Project, "We are called to see the face of God in the person standing in front of us. We don't live alone. We are all called to live in solidarity with others and do what we can to strive for justice and improve the community. I see that in The Ezekiel Project people."

All three CCHD-funded groups have addressed the challenges presented by the pandemic and turned them into opportunities to work more closely with the people they serve. ☪