



Horses on the roadside near the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota.

Renewing the Face of the Earth: Organizing for Sustainability and Economic Health on the Western Plains

Families in the western Plains states have traditionally sustained themselves and their communities through farming and ranching. Over the last 50 years, however, these critical activities have been eclipsed by large-scale fossil fuel extraction and huge industrialized agricultural operations.

The sad result is environmental degradation and a dramatic decline in rural population, health, and economic well-being.

The Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) is a network of eight grassroots community organizations in seven states—Colorado, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Wyoming—plus many of the Native nations that share that geography. The

constituent groups have more than 19,000 members in 41 local chapters that serve rural and urban communities across the Northern Plains, Rocky Mountain West, and Pacific Northwest. Members include farmers, ranchers, small business owners, workers, students, educators, and retirees who reflect the region’s diversity. WORC’s mission is to advance a vision of a democratic, sustainable, and just society through community action.

WORC’s organizations have complementary strengths and different priorities, but all share a commitment to establish a base of concerned people directly involved in working for stewardship and conservation of land, water, and energy resources; for healthy local food systems; and for sustainable local economies.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) chose WORC to receive a five-year Strategic National Grant to build resilient and prosperous communities, support economic diversification, and grow green economies.

CCHD established the Strategic National Grant program as a response to timely opportunities relevant to the priorities of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The grant program focuses on strategies to fight the root causes of poverty and reflects CCHD’s foundations of Catholic teaching, participation, and nonpartisanship.

Community Addresses Toxic Legacy

Natural resource extraction has been a dominant sector in the region. But when the oil rigs leave and coal miners exhaust the last seam, the result is often a toxic legacy of ghost towns, diminished community health, and contaminated water and soil. At the same time, federal agriculture policy has increasingly favored



COMMITTEE ON DOMESTIC JUSTICE
AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Most Reverend Paul S. Coakley, Chairman
ARCHBISHOP OF OKLAHOMA CITY

Most Reverend Frank J. Dewane
BISHOP OF VENICE

Most Reverend David J. Malloy
BISHOP OF ROCKFORD

Most Reverend David G. O'Connell
AUXILIARY BISHOP OF LOS ANGELES

Most Reverend Richard E. Pates
BISHOP EMERITUS OF DES MOINES

Most Reverend Timothy C. Senior
AUXILIARY BISHOP OF PHILADELPHIA

Most Reverend David P. Talley
BISHOP OF MEMPHIS

Most Reverend James S. Wall
BISHOP OF GALLUP

Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski
ARCHBISHOP OF MIAMI

SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CATHOLIC
CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Most Reverend David G. O'Connell, Chairman
AUXILIARY BISHOP OF LOS ANGELES

Most Reverend David P. Talley
BISHOP OF MEMPHIS

Most Reverend John Stowe, OFM Conv
BISHOP OF LEXINGTON

Most Reverend Gerald F. Kicanas
BISHOP EMERITUS OF TUCSON

Most Reverend Fernard Cheri, III, OFM
AUXILIARY BISHOP OF NEW ORLEANS

Most Reverend John P. Dolan
AUXILIARY BISHOP OF SAN DIEGO

Most Reverend Timothy E. Freyer
AUXILIARY BISHOP OF ORANGE

Most Reverend Mark O'Connell
AUXILIARY BISHOP OF BOSTON



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

The popular image of the American West includes amber waves of grain that stretch to the horizon, robust cowboys on horseback moving countless cattle across broad prairies, and pristine landscapes that change color in the setting sun. Of course, real life is more complex and nuanced.

Our neighbors in the Plains states are experiencing a period of transition. Family farms and ranches cannot compete with industrial agriculture and mechanized meat-production facilities. Decades of large-scale mining and drilling have scarred the land and contaminated the water. Rural communities are finding it increasingly difficult to remain viable, and more people are living in poverty. But people are resilient and remain hopeful.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has a history of helping people in cities and rural areas alike to help themselves move their families and communities toward healthy, sustainable, self-determined goals. In this issue, you can read how we are supporting the Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) to raise up local leaders who can identify shared concerns and build resilient and prosperous communities.

It's a huge job, so we are using a CCHD Strategic National Grant to support WORC's multifaceted program. WORC is working to heal the scars from decades of fossil fuel extraction and industrialization, to support economic diversification, and to expand environmentally sustainable practices.

We chose WORC to receive a Strategic National Grant because it is a network of active grassroots organizations whose members know their communities and are eager to help people work together to ensure a vibrant future. WORC's members are farmers, ranchers, small business owners, workers, students, educators, and retirees who reflect the diversity of the area.

WORC is committed to working to improve the lives of impoverished and low-income Westerners through community organizing—no simple task in rural areas where geography often challenges the community. I have seen that WORC has the unique ability to forge and maintain relationships in really difficult arenas.

WORC embraces the value of bringing people together despite environmental concerns, declining family farms, and abandoned communities, and WORC knows how to convert disparate people into united neighborhoods that work together remarkably well.

CCHD is able to support this type of impactful, well-considered program through the generosity of donors like you. One of WORC's leaders recently said that CCHD funding underscored the tremendous power of community organizing. She said her group is using the lessons learned in the one-on-one conversations with neighbors to make a sustained impact on the larger community and shape the future of the organization.

Thank you for your enthusiastic encouragement, generous contributions, and fervent prayers for this life-affirming work.

RALPH McCLOUD, Director
Catholic Campaign for Human Development

The annual collection for CCHD is in November. This collection is the primary source of the funds we use to break the cycle of poverty by helping low-income people participate in decisions that affect their lives, families, and communities.

You can be part of CCHD's critical work by donating at Mass or through your parish's online giving platform. #iGiveCatholicTogether also accepts funds for CCHD. Visit: <https://usccb.igivecatholictogether.org/organizations/usccb-catholic-campaign-for-human-development> to learn more.



Continued from page 1

large, industrial, vertically integrated agribusinesses controlled by a limited number of entities, which are rarely local and increasingly foreign-owned.

The decline in coal and oil extraction, the fallout from the methods used, and the shift to industrial farming has sparked a massive transition in the region. Sara Kendall, WORC's interim executive director and a 28-year employee, says people who might have had differing priorities or limited interactions in the past have come together to work for sustainable, resilient local communities.

"Locally based agriculture businesses have been the mainstay of our region. When farmers and ranchers are successful, they return a lot to the communities" by way of employment, related services, and civic growth, Sara says.

"It's important to understand that people can own land but still struggle. Farmers and ranchers don't get a wage, they get a price. They are vulnerable to volatile pricing. Their share of the food dollar has shrunk. Many have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet," Sara says.

WORC is using the CCHD Strategic National Grant to focus on economically diversifying declining rural communities. "Our goal is to create a pathway out of poverty for rural residents by supporting the building of vibrant, resilient, environmentally sustainable communities through

community organizing and economic development," Sara says.

"Successful economic renewal needs to be built by developing a shared local vision with local solutions, directed and championed by local leaders. It's a process that will be greatly aided by the work of strong grassroots community organizations," she adds.

A Commitment to Environmental Justice

"Contamination makes communities less resilient. When contamination exists, it's harder to attract other businesses," Sara says. "So much of our economy has been based on natural resource extraction, and now we are all dealing with the aftermath. Farmers, ranchers, and Indigenous people share a deep connection to the land."

"Healing the scars from fossil fuel development is a job creator, extending employment opportunities for workers while restoring land, water, and facilities to a condition where they fulfill community needs and values and can support new economic activity," she says.

WORC has encouraged the development of comprehensive reclamation policies for land disturbed by mining and drilling. Jobs in the reclamation sector include moving earth and restoring topsoil, reseeding and replanting trees, and reestablishing waterways.

In Colstrip, Montana, for example, where contamination from a power plant's ash pond leached into the groundwater, Sara says local ranchers are working with power plant workers and other members of the community to ensure that the pollution is removed and securely disposed of. The reclamation project also provides jobs for workers as the power plant closes down, which helps prevent a wave of poverty in the community, she says.

Adapting Traditional Organizing Approaches to Rural Settings

Community organizing typically entails knocking on doors, block by urban block, to listen to individual concerns and help people come together around shared issues. This approach becomes much more challenging when homes are widely separated in rural areas. "Communities are remote, and travel can be a barrier," Sara agrees.

"In rural areas, people wear many civic hats and rely on one another in unique ways. Your neighbor may be on the school board and also serve as a volunteer firefighter," she explains.



Stephanie Peterson drops off her pasture-raised eggs at a local farmers market in South Dakota. Stephanie attended Dakota Rural Action's Farm Beginnings Program when she was starting out to learn about running her own sustainable agriculture business.



A worker with Western Native Voice's Day Labor program took a break from trash pickup to smile for a portrait near Lame Deer, Montana.



➔ Continued from page 3

“Relationships with one another are important and can also create challenges. Someone may be reluctant to be outspoken on an issue, but speaking out can be powerful. We start with the relationships we have, listen to local leaders, and build trust and support,” Sara says.

The Western Colorado Alliance (WCA) is a WORC member group that covers 11 counties. Emily Hornback, WCA’s executive director, describes a CCHD-funded relational campaign that surfaced actionable issues.

After meeting with individuals one on one and then convening house meetings of five to eight people in Montrose County, Colorado, WCA gathered 100 participants who voted to work together on access to childcare. They applied for and were granted county funds for a needs assessment that identified a host of challenges facing both parents and childcare providers. It is difficult for most childcare providers to find qualified staff. Unlicensed providers fill an essential need but have compelling reasons to remain unlicensed. Costs concern all parties.

WCA is working with the county to address the issues. “We are having conversations with the unlicensed providers to see what their needs are and invite their problem-solving into it,” Emily says. “We’re building relationships with the parents and the providers.”

“The city and county have spent a lot of money on tourism. We want to make sure they spend money for the public good, for the needs of the people who live there. Without a group like ours pushing the county to act, it will spend its money to act on easy things,” she says.

Developing Job Opportunities

Steady employment is key to economic sustainability. Western Native Voice (WNV), a WORC member focused on Native Americans, supports the Northern Cheyenne Day Labor program in Montana. It provides paid job opportunities for people who live on tribal lands, especially those whose lack of a high school diploma or driver’s license make it difficult to



Jeff and Rhonda Locker stand near a gas well on their farm near Pavillion, Wyoming. Their drinking water well was contaminated during the most recent drilling boom. Powder River Basin Resource Council and WORC are organizing residents who have suffered impacted health and water to pressure the gas company to fix the problems.

access other entry-level jobs. In 2021, 120 individuals earned money fulfilling the program’s contract with the Northern Cheyenne tribe’s Environmental Protection Department. WNV has now expanded the program to work with other Native peoples in Montana.

Healthy Workers and Healthy Food

The people who grow and process food often make up an unseen part of the agricultural chain. WORC member Idaho Organization of Resource Councils (IORC) supported a local chapter when farmworkers were exposed to pesticides used in crop-dusting.

Two dozen workers in Parma, Idaho, were sickened by pesticides that drifted from a spraying operation in an onion field adjacent to the one where they were harvesting hops. This drift was not an isolated incident, but it attracted attention because of its severity. IORC’s community organizer, Irene Ruiz, conducted a bilingual assessment that surfaced widespread support for acting on pesticide exposure, and she created a local chapter, with this becoming its first issue.

IORC, its new local chapter, and other groups pushed the state legislature to protect farmworkers and those who live near sprayed fields. They sought to amend proposed legislation that seemed to favor crop dusters and to dismiss health and environmental concerns. Although the advocates won certain concessions, the proposed law was ultimately vetoed. But the issue will be raised again. Irene said IORC’s role is not to speak for the farmworkers and the people they organize but rather to ensure that the people they organize can be involved in the process. “It’s important we

uplift the voices who do the work, which is the farmworkers,” Irene says.

Strategic National Grant Opens New Doors

CCHD’s focus on low-income leadership of funded groups has been inspirational to WORC, Sara says. “The grant has helped us get back to basics, invest deeply in community-organizing work, and be very intentional about who we’re talking to and organizing with. We are asking ourselves different questions and looking closely at how we are building connections between people.”

“Our network is growing, and we are working with more diverse groups.” Sara says. “We have also been creating a vision to grow and expand our training and support program.”

“Our unique niche is to organize people in their communities [and] to identify issues they can work on together to change conditions affecting their lives. Our network provides that capacity virtually exclusively in our communities in the rural West, especially in the area of promoting economic transitions,” Sara says. ☘



AN INITIATIVE OF THE
CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

*More than 40 million
Americans live in poverty.*

POVERTYUSA.ORG
POBREZAUSA.ORG