



Below: Speaking to 1,900 PEACE members, Sheriff Grady Judd of Polk County agreed to create a pre-arrest diversion program for children.

Right: 1,900 people showed up to the PEACE (Polk Ecumenical Action Council for Empowerment) Polk Nehemiah Action to press for civil citations, a pre-arrest diversion for children who make first-time, non-violent mistakes.



CCHD Funding Fuels Historic Criminal Justice Victory in Florida

“Imagine,” says AnnMarie Silveira, “if mistakes you made in your youth affected the rest of your life. In Florida, that’s what was happening to tens of thousands of young folks for a long time.” AnnMarie is the operations manager and training coordinator for Direct Action and Research Training Center, or DART.

BY RHINA GUIDOS

DART helps local interfaith groups train leaders and build ministries that focus on matters of justice among faith-based organizations in Florida and other states in the southeastern United States. More than a decade ago, leaders of these local groups were notifying DART of a disturbing pattern among Florida’s youth.

“I actually was the lead organizer on staff at PEACE [Polk Ecumenical Action Council for Empowerment], which is an affiliate of DART,” said AnnMarie. “We were one of 10 Florida organizations that were working together on a collaborative. We have a listening process in the fall, and we started hearing stories in these listening sessions about children that were being arrested for very minor offenses.”

Offenses included shoplifting and trespassing, which yielded not just an arrest but a record that haunted a young person well into the future. Children who had committed even one nonviolent offense were prevented from applying for scholarships, advanced education, and sometimes careers because of one past transgression.

She tells of one 17-year-old caught shoplifting. Though the teenager didn’t commit any other offenses, years later, after she finished nursing school, she was denied a nursing license because of her arrest record for shoplifting as a teen.

“There was another story about two 10-year-old boys walking home through an orange grove, and they got arrested for trespassing. Then there was a 6-year-old who threw an eraser in the classroom,



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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, CCHD has contributed more than \$464
million to more than 12,200 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,

Starting something new is always an exciting undertaking. I'm honored to step into the role of director of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Having previously served as the assistant director and, before that, as the communications manager for social mission at USCCB, I've long admired the important work of the campaign and am eager to continue advancing its mission.

CCHD has a storied history of helping communities that have been excluded and neglected to develop a voice and fight to transform unjust conditions in their midst. In this newsletter, you will read about one such example through the work of Direct Action and Research Training Center (DART) in Florida.

With funding from CCHD, DART helped local faith-based organizations come together, identify a problem, and not only solve it but manage to bring about long-lasting change at the state level.

More than a decade ago, these organizations spotted a disturbing trend: high rates of incarceration among youth in Florida for nonviolent offenses. The record from those arrests—sometimes the only such incident in the lives of youths—prevented some from getting jobs or scholarships, kept them from enrolling in a university or college, and in one case prevented a nursing school graduate from obtaining a nursing license because of a shoplifting incident in her youth.

With a grant from CCHD, thousands of grassroots leaders from DART affiliates in Florida were trained to build power to effectively communicate their communities' concerns. Many spoke to police and lawmakers about the need for diversion programs statewide to hold minors accountable for their offenses but allow them to avoid a criminal record that could deny them a second chance with future educational and work opportunities.

Community leaders' concerns were heard, and the resulting legislation did just that.

Miami's Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski joined other Catholic leaders in Florida in praising the effort in June 2024, saying the legislative change was "enormous."

I couldn't agree more.

Through my years working with CCHD as well as supporting the domestic justice priorities of the bishops of the United States, I've seen firsthand the power of grassroots organizations and the lasting impact of CCHD's work. These efforts continue to make CCHD one of the most impactful antipoverty programs in the United States. And as I step into this new role, I'm excited to build on this tremendous legacy.

ALEXANDRA CARROLL

Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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Left: Leaders and clergy from HOPE (Hillsborough Organization for Progress and Equality) march around the sheriff's office to press for increased use of their civil citation program and for the inclusion of more misdemeanor offenses in the program. **Right:** ICARE (Interfaith Coalition for Action, Reconciliation, and Empowerment) leaders and clergy in Jacksonville, Florida, organized a prayer vigil to create pressure regarding the urgent need for civil citations.

and was arrested for battery," AnnMarie said. "There were these horrible stories, so that year, we decided to focus in on youth arrest in a general sense."

As faith groups like PEACE began doing research, they discovered high rates of arrests among the children in Florida, where those as young as seven years old can be arrested—the youngest minimum age of incarceration in the country. They found that only some Florida counties—not all—had diversion programs to hold youth accountable for minor offenses without making them criminals on paper for the rest of their lives.

"As a network, we started hearing these stories in a lot of other places as well, from Miami to Jacksonville, Tampa to Volusia County," AnnMarie said. "We realized that this was a statewide issue. There were thousands and thousands of children."

With DART's model, which organizes local communities for a common cause, "all of us were doing local campaigns with our police chiefs or sheriffs or state attorneys" to get more children into diversion programs, AnnMarie said.

"But then we said, 'If there was a statewide bill that required officers to issue citations when they're eligible, this would totally change the landscape of Florida,'" she added. "We started working together as a criminal justice collaborative, the Florida Criminal Justice

"The support from CCHD allowed some focused time to train organizers and leaders, both to win the statewide legislation, but then also to hold officials accountable."

Collaborative, and engaged key clergy and leaders from across these different DART affiliates in Florida. Ultimately, we got a sponsor for a bill that required every single county in the state of Florida to have a pre-arrest diversion program."

The effort, which received funding from a Catholic Campaign for Human Development grant for criminal justice and juvenile diversion, is "a major accomplishment," one that has kept reaping rewards, said John Aeschbury, DART's executive director.

"It had a couple of different layers, but as of now, 70,000 kids have been diverted from the

criminal justice system in Florida as a part of that campaign," said John.

It was praised in June 2024 by Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami, who wrote glowingly of it in the archdiocesan newspaper *The Florida Catholic*.

"[In 2017], ten DART affiliates came together with the Florida Catholic Conference and others to press the state legislature to expand the use of civil citations so that young people would not be arrested and saddled with a criminal record for non-serious offenses," he wrote. "Then those DART affiliates pushed local law enforcement and States [*sic*] Attorneys to use those civil citations rather than arrest."

This effort culminated in March 2018, when the bill passed the state legislature and was signed into law. With this victory, the effect of organizing faith communities for justice-focused goals became apparent.

"There is a measurable difference between counties in Florida where there is a DART affiliate and how active the government is in using civil citations and the number of kids being diverted out of the system, as opposed to counties where there is not a DART affiliate. It is a combination of the grassroots organizing to hold local officials accountable and the statewide legislation," John said. "The support from CCHD allowed some focused time to train organizers and leaders, both



Fr. Chris Hoffman, co-chair of the DART Criminal Justice Collaborative and a member of FAITH (Fighting Against Injustice Towards Harmony) in Volusia County, Florida, prepares the crowd at their Nehemiah Action for negotiation with the Sheriff.

to win the statewide legislation, but then also to hold officials accountable.”

DART’s local affiliate organizations and their memberships are made up primarily of churches and various religious groups, including Catholic parishes, Protestant churches, and Jewish synagogues.

“They are the vehicle through which we organize people,” he added.

For John, a pastor involved in social justice issues for more than three decades, faith and organizing go hand in hand.

“Biblically, justice is holding the king, nobles, and officials accountable for the fair treatment of all people, especially the poor, the widow [and] the orphan, and the immigrants. That’s what the Bible says, right? And it’s justice, mercy, and faithfulness, not or faithfulness,” he said, referring to Matthew 23:23.

When DART works with its faith-based affiliates, most recognize that they are very good at ministry, worship, prayer, Sunday school, and education. They’re also “very good at mercy ministries,” such as serving meals, providing housing, and offering tutoring—all programs that deal with individual victims and community problems, John adds.

“But when it comes to justice—and again, biblically, justice is holding the people in charge accountable for the conditions in the community.

That’s what the prophets do, right? That’s what Jesus does. . . . If we’re going to be effective at that, we have to build the power of organized people to hold those officials accountable,” he said.

AnnMarie said that the financial resources provided by CCHD helped with training to equip low-income leaders to become part of that system and to develop a voice in a community where they are normally not seated at the decision-making table.

“We train leaders and clergy to be the spokespeople for the organization. They are the leaders of the organization. So the organizers in DART do not speak for the faith community. The faith community speaks for themselves,” she added. “Hundreds, thousands of grassroots leaders have been trained and have learned how to build power to effectively make change, and without CCHD, they would not have had the opportunity to learn about how to fulfill Catholic social teaching on social justice, but also actually make a systemic difference in the community.”

The effort is not a temporary fix. Institutional change has been made. Because of it, tens of thousands of children every year will be diverted from the criminal justice system and will take part in programs that can help them, without ruining their future for mistakes made in their youth.

“That is permanent policy that will not go away,” AnnMarie said. “That is the new way of taking care of our kids and our community. That’s what’s

so beautiful about justice work or systemic work: it’s that it has long-lasting changes. Florida every year is going to arrest fewer children because of the work [done] through the support of CCHD.”

DART’s organizing process is designed to engage people at the grassroots level to address community problems and then build the power to hold their local officials accountable to solve those problems. The process “is very consistent with the principle of subsidiarity, in the sense that the people most directly affected by the problem are researching the problem and holding their officials accountable to implement the solutions that they have identified that meet the community needs,” John added.

The process also is an expression of the preferential option for the poor, because God, in Scripture and human history, is always on the side of the poor and looks at community issues from the vantage point of people at the margins. And in this case, John explained, “people at the margins are very much involved in surfacing the problems, researching solutions, and then holding their officials accountable.”

DART’s success in helping Florida’s youth who enter the criminal justice system is one of countless victories that have reshaped local communities to make them more just.

Archbishop Wenski praised the affiliates’ work in the state on a variety of issues. “Along with the issue victories, CCHD helps local parishes learn and act on key Catholic values such as solidarity, subsidiarity, and the preferential option for the poor,” he wrote. “The work of CCHD flows from the central tenets of Catholic teaching. It is not adjacent to that teaching. It is a deep and powerful expression of our core values.” ✚

Editor’s note: Text from Archbishop Wenski’s article used with permission from The Florida Catholic.



AN INITIATIVE OF THE
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Americans in poverty.

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