



Sr. Mary Ellen Robinson, a Catholic nun, volunteers her time watching over children while their mothers participate in the Young Moms Group in Wapato, Washington. She is often seen doing puppet shows, singing, coloring, doing puzzles, and using her imagination while crawling on the floor with the children.

## PREPARES gives families what social service cannot —CCHD Strategic National Grant Program

BY BETH GRIFFIN

What if committed parish volunteers could discourage abortion and then support a young woman's decision to choose life in a sustained, practical way?

In 2014 the four Catholic bishops of Washington state turned this “audacious idea” into a statewide program that has now recruited and trained 491 volunteers and served more than 16,400 pregnant moms and their families.

The PREPARES program is a parish-based initiative to accompany pregnant women and families with children under the age of five. Each parish program reflects the culture and needs of its people, but all include basic assistance, one-on-one companionship, and events to build skills and community. PREPARES was launched and sustained with significant funding from the Strategic National Grant Program of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). CCHD established the Strategic National Grant Program as a discretionary

response to timely opportunities relevant to the priorities of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The grants embody CCHD’s mission to overcome the root causes of poverty and reflect its foundation in Catholic teaching and Catholic identity. They are often regionally based rather than diocese-based and address issues that need broad, strategic, innovative, and focused action.

“The Church in Washington was doing phenomenal work on life and social justice issues, but we needed a way to galvanize the efforts and create a unified ministry,” says PREPARES program manager Syndee Saucedo Cavazos. PREPARES built on the social service experiences of the three Catholic Charities organizations in the state to train parish volunteers as family

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LETTER FROM  
THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends:

I want to brag (just a little!) about an ongoing statewide initiative funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). These contentious times make it important for us to spotlight an effort that is building bridges where some observers have seen only chasms.

The so-called chasm is an artificial distinction in parts of our Church between parishioners who work for justice and those who support life. I say “artificial” because the supposed divide is often a label given by external observers and not participants. Some accuse us of being more interested in the life of the unborn than the dignity of the born. In reality, Catholic grassroots, parish-based, Gospel-driven actions in favor of pro-life and social justice concerns are complementary and overlapping.

My current favorite example is PREPARES, the subject of this issue of the *Helping People Help Themselves* newsletter. The Catholic bishops of Washington state have created a robust network of social service agencies staffed by professionals who provide effective assistance to thousands of individuals and families each year. In addition, Respect Life groups are active throughout the state offering prayer, maternal support, and legislative urging. Nonetheless, the bishops had a vision to expand these networks into parishes and tie together the various elements focusing on low-income communities.

With the help of a five-year CCHD Strategic National Grant, they have trained almost 500 volunteers as family companions to accompany more than 16,400 women and their young families. The volunteers provide material aid but also accompany families in the critical and sometimes challenging first five years of a child’s life. These volunteer mentors walk

with the young mothers and share and celebrate the growth and developmental milestones of their children. And sometimes they serve as quiet listeners, offering a hand, a prayer, or an embrace.

Not surprisingly, PREPARES has fed the faith of the volunteers as well as the families it helps. It calls people into a deeper relationship with God and with one another by going to the margins and sharing the struggles of new families.

In many ways, PREPARES is Respect Life in action. The organizers in Washington state report that the volunteers are drawn to its practical, personal, boots-on-the-ground way of reflecting the Gospel. This bridge-building project brings together vital ministries of the Church in a truly sustainable way. We are proud to support PREPARES and its new adjunct, PREPARES en Español.

Another point of Christian discipleship is the witness of Ana Chavarin, who was named the 2019 Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award recipient for her tireless work in low-income communities with CCHD-funded Pima County Interfaith in Arizona.

*Thank you for your steady support of CCHD.*

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



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CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR  
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

*More than 40 million  
Americans live in poverty.*

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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 \$300 million to more than 8,000 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 that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective, and so that 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.





This volunteer supported her PREPARES family for the past year and is unwavering in continuing to accompany them today. She was honored by being invited to attend a birth in the family.



A monolingual mother of three came to PREPARES seeking support while pregnant with triplets. She was paired with a bilingual family companion who touched her life in many ways. This volunteer now works as a lead member of the PREPARES team and is serving hundreds of other families across central Washington.

"She has become an angel to our family," says the mother. After three years, the PREPARES volunteer continues to walk alongside them. "Meeting this family has changed my life. I am grateful for the opportunity to live out my faith," said the family companion.

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companions for marginalized women.

"People wanted to know what else they could do after a family said yes to life. We developed a strategy based on best practices in social work to walk alongside a family," Syndee says.

Leanne LaBissoniere is the parish outreach coordinator for Catholic Charities Serving Central Washington and is also the CCHD director for the Diocese of Yakima. She says, "It's about accompaniment. It's not just giving diapers and clothing and helping in a material way but being there as a companion for people in a very vulnerable time in their lives."

"Most of the volunteers are women who have raised children and can share the wisdom that comes from that, but we also have some men who are mentoring fathers," Leanne adds.

Although the program does not proselytize, Leanne says, "it is a form of evangelization. It shows how we love and serve others because we are Catholic."

She says PREPARES feeds the faith of the volunteers as well as the families they accompany. Volunteer Siri Fadich agrees. "It was an eye-opening experience for me to put myself in another person's shoes and try to understand that if you're living in poverty, your first priority is survival. It's a different perspective."

Siri is helping a young mother who has battled homelessness and multiple addictions. "I feel like maybe I am making a difference in her life. I see her potential and may be the only one who believes in her. She is otherwise surrounded by people who diminish her and tell her negative things," she says.

"I pray for her and that draws me closer to God, and I always look for little inspirational things I can bring her," she says.

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According to Siri, PREPARES can give families what social service agencies cannot: a friend, a hug, a prayer, someone who cares and can be reached outside business hours.

Janie Ibarra, another volunteer family companion, says, "You can see God's work in what we're doing and in our

clients. Even though they have all these struggles, they have such great faith," she says. She helps a family that took in six children after a relative's violent death in a domestic incident. "The mom is grateful for everything we can do and keeps thanking God for us. She's so patient with the [now eight] kids, and the dad has taught them to plant a garden," she says.

"The fact that we can be there is a gift. Sometimes you visit and read to the children and ask the mom how things are going. Sometimes you just sit and let people cry and offer comfort," Janie adds.

The success of PREPARES and the growing population of Spanish-speaking families in Washington inspired the Dioceses of Yakima and Spokane to seek additional CCHD funding to develop PREPARES en Español, a pregnancy and parenting support program. It parallels the original initiative but uses a slightly different approach that is more culturally relevant for the new volunteers, many of whose roots are in rural Mexico.

"PREPARES en Español sessions are built on conversations, dialogue, collective thinking, and the sharing of experiences," Syndee explains, whereas "the original program relies more heavily on PowerPoint presentations and classroom instruction."

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Ana Chavarin (c) with Sr. Leonette Kochan, OSF, former CCHD Diocesan Director for Diocese of Tucson, CCHD Executive Director Ralph McCloud, and Bishop Gerald Kicanas, the Bishop Emeritus of the Diocese of Tucson.

## Bernardin Award Winner

Ana Chavarin, interim lead organizer at the CCHD-funded group Pima County Interfaith in Tucson, Arizona, is the winner of the 2019 Cardinal Bernardin New Leadership Award. Ana, a young immigrant mother, was honored for her efforts to mobilize migrant families and faith communities to influence the issues that affect them. She played a lead role in a campaign to increase community safety and address drug abuse, and she led numerous sessions with immigration attorneys on the issues of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), rights of the undocumented, and the process to become a citizen. Ana has helped hundreds of undocumented immigrants obtain powers of attorney to protect their children and property in case they are detained or deported.

In her letter nominating Ana, Sr. Leonette Kochan, OSF, said, "Ana's Catholic faith motivates and inspires her role as a parent, faith community member, and leader in the wide range of social outreach initiatives in which she participates." Sr. Leonette is the former director of the Office of Human Life and Dignity in the Diocese of Tucson.

When she accepted the award, Ana said, "This work has helped me to achieve things I never imagined possible. I have learned how to teach, lead, think and analyze, connect with people, see what others don't see, and to have the courage to make changes in my community. This work also brought me closer to my faith, to my God-given purpose and my community."

For information about the award visit <https://tinyurl.com/8aln98u>



This Spanish-speaking volunteer came to PREPARES as a mother in need. Now, she gives back by facilitating a weekly parent-toddler group and will serve hundreds of other families as she is being brought on as PREPARES staff.

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Syndee says that the PREPARES program has dramatically increased the Church's outreach by incorporating trained volunteers to help neighbors in need. She credits the bishops with organizing the effort and praises the local pastors who are at the forefront of the ministry. "Our initial mission was to build a bridge between two vital, important ministries of

Bishop Joseph J. Tyson of Yakima spearheaded the creation of PREPARES. He says, "We want to make sure that no child, born or unborn, is ever abandoned or alone. We want to make sure that every mother, whether she is in a small rural town or large city, has caring people around her, walking those critical first five years of her child's life."

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the Church: life and justice," Syndee says. "We wanted to blend strategies used by various groups—and we found that many of the people who pray at abortion clinics also take the opportunity to volunteer as companions. As a Church, we can robustly speak out to end abortion, and we can also walk with families when they have made the critical choice for life."

In her dual roles with CCHD and PREPARES, Leanne observes, "It's been great to see how the mission of CCHD is played out in a one-family-at-a-time manner. PREPARES is lifting people out of poverty in a subtle yet powerful way. It begins with the life of the child and carries over into improvements in the lives and outcomes for the family."

A video about PREPARES is available at <https://tinyurl.com/sb9x6rt>