



UIA New Bedford Community Action Meeting, spring 2019. Police Chief Joseph Cordeiro shows a sign of support and commitment to proposals made by UIA leaders on public safety and community engagement in the church hall of Our Lady of the Assumption, New Bedford, MA.

# CCHD Provides Grants to Fund a Massachusetts Eviction Moratorium

BY BETH GRIFFIN

Years before the COVID-19 pandemic, the housing market in Boston and throughout other areas of Massachusetts was hot and growing hotter. Working-class tenants were displaced from affordable housing by skyrocketing rents as areas “gentrified.”

Landlords held the threat of eviction over the heads of tenants living paycheck to paycheck. For many, the dream of homeownership evaporated as prices increased.

When the economy shut down abruptly in March 2020, thousands of people employed in minimum-wage and low-wage jobs were out of work. In addition to feeding their families and trying to keep them safe from the virus, they faced the immediate challenge of keeping a roof over their heads. People who had never missed a rent payment suddenly lacked an income and had to scramble for survival. Homeowners faced foreclosure when they lost their jobs.

Two organizations that receive grants from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) leapt into action alongside others to promote a statewide eviction and foreclosure moratorium bill. They used their considerable listening, organizing, and communication skills to rally support among tenants and engage legislators and community leaders. The bill was signed into law in April 2020. The four-

month moratorium on eviction and home foreclosures was subsequently extended to October 2020.

The two CCHD-funded groups— Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO) and Massachusetts Communities Action Network (MCAN)—took advantage of their deep roots in the community to mobilize members and constituents. Even so, shutdowns and other restrictions closed off their traditional successful organizing methods: house meetings, rallies, listening sessions in church basements, and group visits to legislators and influencers.

Kathleen Patron is lead organizer of GBIO. The 20-year-old group of 41 member organizations had planned to use 2020 as a refounding period to build stronger internal relationships and expand membership. “We were rocked by the shutdown,” Kathleen says. “We spent the first two to three weeks engaging members, listening to how the pandemic impacted them, and identifying their needs. After concerns about job loss and health care, their biggest fear was how they would be able to stay in their homes.”

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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



The coronavirus pandemic has taken a disproportionate toll on the health and employment of the most marginalized people; it has been particularly hard on people of color. It should be no surprise that it has also devastated their access to safe, affordable housing. Tenants who struggled to pay the rent even when fully employed faced new crises when they became ill or lost their jobs. Many were threatened with eviction, and few had a place to turn.

In Massachusetts, two organizations funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) tapped their deep roots in the community and their longtime experience mobilizing people to work for a common goal. They joined other concerned groups to lobby successfully for a 120-day moratorium on eviction and foreclosure. The statewide moratorium was extended into October 2020.

Both Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO) and Massachusetts Communities Action Network (MCAN), and their affiliates, have posted impressive wins during decades of training leaders and organizing people to change unjust structures and seek equal treatment and opportunities for all. Although housing has not been the primary focus of either organization in recent years, both groups listened carefully to their members who were impacted by the pandemic and economic shutdown. They helped meet immediate needs, coordinated aid and information with local social service groups, and focused tremendous attention on the moratorium legislation.

With the moratorium in place, they helped tenants whose landlords persisted in trying to evict them. Those who are undocumented were in a particularly precarious situation and were fearful of reporting their treatment. Both groups currently support moratorium extensions at the federal and local levels, as well as state action for rent regulations.

GBIO and MCAN work in different parts of the state of Massachusetts, but they use similar strategies. From their early days, they have enjoyed participation by Catholic parishes and individuals. Priests who know them well reminded us recently that both groups are effective because they are consistent, practical, thoughtful, experienced, and focused. Fr. J. Bryan

Hehir is one of the Catholic Church's leading thinkers in the realm of social justice. We are fortunate to have him as a member of the local CCHD committee in the Archdiocese of Boston. He says that MCAN and GBIO "strategize things that are doable. They have the experience of articulating issues, getting people involved, and presenting their case to legislators in a way that makes sense."

Like so many of the groups CCHD supports, these groups embody this beautiful simple reflection from Pope Francis's recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti (On Fraternity and Social Friendship)*: "If we accept the great principle that there are rights born of our inalienable human dignity, we can rise to the challenge of envisaging a new humanity. We can aspire to a world that provides land, housing and work for all" (no. 127).

GBIO and MCAN are working to make that world a reality. Thank you for helping us to support their efforts.

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



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“Taking the time to listen was our best decision. It was galvanizing,” Kathleen says. “Our power comes from our deep relationships with one another. We determined the most important thing we could do was to act together.”

Like so much of the country, GBIO used Zoom to hold listening sessions and also to provide training sessions for member congregations. A group of 10 GBIO clergy met with Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker, while other GBIO leaders and members went online and worked the phones to urge legislators to support the eviction and foreclosure moratorium.

Kathleen says CCHD funding expanded GBIO’s leadership capacity and enabled the organization to quickly and effectively address the housing issue.



UIA New Bedford Community Action Meeting, spring 2019. Fr. Sudhir Nayak, former pastor of Our Lady of the Assumption, and Martin Bentz, outreach coordinator of the Islamic Society of Southeastern MA, lead an interfaith reflection with local and state officials and 200 community members on the issues of education and public safety.



UIA members Felix Gonzalez, Jennie Antunes, and Renee Ledbetter engage in dialogue for a more equitable Commonwealth with other community leaders from around the state in the Massachusetts Communities Action Network, winter 2019.

“Our power comes from our deep relationships with one another. We determined the most important thing we could do was to act together.”

Lewis (Lew) Finfer is senior organizer of MCAN, a 35-year-old statewide coalition of seven primarily faith-based groups. After the initial successful push to pass the eviction and foreclosure moratorium bill, MCAN worked to educate members about their rights under a patchwork of local, state, and federal measures proposed or enacted after the state moratorium expired. The state moratorium passed after an intense, unusually short six-week campaign, Lew says. Subsequent efforts have been harder to sustain. Legislators’ receptivity to the initial moratorium has cooled, and landlords have lobbied vigorously to discontinue the moratorium.

“The economic impact on poor and working-class people will go beyond the end of the pandemic,” Lew says. “With rising home prices, gentrification, and the lack of rent control protections, people are paying a higher percentage of their wages for rent, and fewer can afford to buy.

“Fewer people are able to have a chance at home ownership and equity, and many move farther from their jobs to afford housing,” he says.

CCHD’s support for community organizing by groups like MCAN “is such a strong expression of Catholic social teaching,” Lew

says. “You need to put your body as well as your money behind your values.”

Fr. Gerald Osterman, chair of the CCHD committee for the Archdiocese of Boston and one of the founding clergy of GBIO, says that MCAN and GBIO tackle issues that individual parishes cannot, although their parishioners are deeply affected by them.

Another longtime member of the archdiocesan CCHD committee, cabinet secretary Fr. J. Bryan Hehir, says, “GBIO and MCAN are very consistent and very practical. They strategize things that are doable. They have the experience of articulating issues, getting people involved,

and presenting their case to legislators in a way that makes sense.

“Politicians respond to these groups because they can attract 1,200 to 1,500 people to an event and ask five or six direct questions that require an answer at the end. If the politicians start wandering, the participants stop them,” Fr. Bryan says.

“They [CCHD] understand where we are coming from as a Church and have a solid intellectual framework,” says Fr. William Joy, assistant vicar general of the archdiocese and another member of its CCHD committee.

Andrea Sheppard Lombar is lead organizer of United Interfaith Action of Southeastern Massachusetts (UIA), an MCAN affiliate in Fall River and New Bedford. UIA has helped families and individuals remain in their homes despite job loss or work slowdowns. “We’ve given stopgap grants of \$500 to cover rent. If tenants can provide evidence they are trying to pay the rent, it helps strengthen their case if the eviction goes to court,” she says.

“The undocumented community was hit extremely hard by the pandemic, with loss of income across the board,” Andrea adds. “They have no access to government stimulus checks or unemployment benefits.

“At the start of the shutdown, UIA developed a mutual aid network and raised money for a COVID community response fund to cover immediate needs we do not ordinarily meet,” she says.

Odete Amarelo, a UIA community leader among Portuguese and Azorean immigrants, describes the perilous situation of a young family in Fall River. “The parents were 20 and 18 and they had an infant and a

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UIA Fall River Community Action Meeting, spring 2019. Odete Amarelo, UIA leader from St. Michael's Parish, listens to fellow community members offering proposals for change to local and state officials in the areas of education, immigration, and addiction in the church hall of Santo Christo, Fall River, MA.

preschooler. They were living in a basement apartment with no windows and paying an astronomical rent for a place that had big-time rats running around," she says. "They were undocumented, so there wasn't much they could say to the landlord."

The husband lost his job when the shutdown began. "Despite the legal moratorium, the landlord said he would throw them out if they did not pay the rent on time, in cash," Odete explains.

UIA provided food and rent money and connected the family to local social service organizations before locating a new apartment for them. "They had to move quietly and in the middle of the night because they were afraid of the landlord's reaction," Odete says.

Sandra Carreiro, another UIA community organizer, says that many families that lost their jobs during the pandemic had never been unable to pay their rent before. She recalls a single mother who functioned as the de facto superintendent for the absentee landlord of her apartment building. "She lost her job early on but is now back at work,"

Sandra says. "In the interim, the landlord threatened eviction and she came to us."

When the mother told her landlord that UIA would send an electronic check for the rent, he accused her of fraud. Ultimately, UIA handed the landlord a money order, and the woman kept her apartment.

"These are hardworking, resourceful people," Andrea says. "So many find themselves out of work, especially those in the undocumented community."

Renee Ledbetter, president of the UIA board, recalls a landlord who tried to evict a tenant whose rent was paid by UIA during the moratorium. "[The landlord] said he did not receive the checks, but the checks were cashed and we had copies with his endorsement," she says.

"Sometimes we had to contact landlords directly and 'remind' them about the moratorium and 'offer' to have our attorney contact them," she says with a tired smile.

"The end of the legal moratorium brought fear," Sandra says. "Even with people back at work, they feel there is nothing to protect them and they may be evicted at any time.

There is a lot of uncertainty."

Andrea agrees. "During the moratorium, it gave me some sense of security to be able to talk with UIA leaders and families facing eviction and say, 'I know these are scary times, but there's a moratorium in effect and we can help.' I can't do that now.

"We need either an extension of the moratorium or state support for rents," she adds. "As an organization, we are still committed to fight at the state and national level to support the most vulnerable communities and help them maintain their housing."

"At UIA, we work very hard to make sure social justice is done in our community. Evictions are a way of taking away someone's human dignity," Renee says.

Fr. Richard Wilson, vicar general for the Diocese of Fall River, is the pastor of parishes associated with UIA. He says relationships formed among member parishes and congregations working toward common goals provide a foundation and network for cooperation when new issues arise. "Because of the relationship, people know you well and will come to help you when you need it," he says.

"UIA's community organizing helps in relationship-building among parishes, clergy, different religions, and public officials," Fr. Richard says. "And people whose leadership abilities are developed under UIA become leaders in their own parishes, too."

Both GBIO and MCAN are local affiliates of national organizing efforts. GBIO is part of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), and MCAN (of which UIA is an affiliate) is associated with the Faith in Action network.

Their work with the state's eviction and foreclosure moratorium and its aftermath is a small but significant part of their efforts on behalf of marginalized communities.

The passage of the bill is also a powerful reminder that well-organized groups of committed people working together can advance the cause of justice. ☘