



COFI members participate in a bilingual training session.

Parents Organize for Improvements in Public Schools

Whether because of race, a history of family abuse, or geography, some children face a tougher future than others from the moment they are born.

BY RHINA GUIDOS

Factors like these can influence patterns of behavior that determine a child's success, or lack of it, from an early age, according to Robert Lewis. Robert is the board president of the grassroots organization Leaders for Equality and Action (LEAD) in Dayton, Ohio.

He has seen this phenomenon through his work at LEAD. But he also has seen how empowering parents can counteract the adversities that negatively impact their children.

Through the work of groups like LEAD and Community Organizing and

Family Issues (COFI) in Chicago—both supported by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD)—parents are finding ways to organize and push for change to make their children's lives better.

"Often when you look at what's happening in a community, you have a lot of external actors who say, 'We know what's best for the community, and we're going to do what we think is best to help the community.' But it may not necessarily involve anyone directly who's in the community," said Robert. "So what

➔ Continued on page 3



COMMITTEE ON DOMESTIC JUSTICE AND
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Most Reverend Borys Gudziak, Chairman
ARCHBISHOP OF UKRAINIAN ARCHDIOCESE
OF PHILADELPHIA

Most Reverend Paul S. Coakley
ARCHBISHOP OF OKLAHOMA CITY

Most Reverend Joseph A. Espallat
AUXILIARY BISHOP OF NEW YORK

Most Reverend Bernard A. Hebda
ARCHBISHOP OF MINNEAPOLIS-ST. PAUL

Most Reverend William M. Joensen
BISHOP OF DES MOINES

Most Reverend William E. Koenig
BISHOP OF WILMINGTON

Most Reverend David J. Malloy
BISHOP OF ROCKFORD

Most Reverend Timothy C. Senior
BISHOP OF HARRISBURG

Most Reverend A. Elias Zaidan
BISHOP OF MARONITE EPARCHY OF OUR
LADY OF LEBANON

SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CATHOLIC
CAMPAIGN FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Most Reverend Timothy C. Senior,
Chairman
BISHOP OF HARRISBURG

Most Reverend John P. Dolan
BISHOP OF PHOENIX

Most Reverend John Stowe, OFM Conv.
BISHOP OF LEXINGTON

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, D.D.
BISHOP OF YAKIMA

Most Reverend Timothy E. Freyer
AUXILIARY BISHOP OF ORANGE

Most Reverend Gerald F. Kicanas
BISHOP EMERITUS OF TUCSON

Most Reverend Bruce A. Lewandowski,
C.Ss.R.
AUXILIARY BISHOP OF BALTIMORE

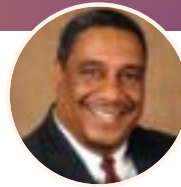
Most Reverend Jorge Rodríguez-Novelo
AUXILIARY BISHOP OF DENVER



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
\$462 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,

At the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), we are proud of our efforts to combat poverty by putting those affected by unjust systems and structures directly in the driver's seat of change in their communities.

In this newsletter, you will read about such an effort involving parents who found themselves and their children facing challenges, including some created by the pandemic.

Organizations such as Leaders for Equality and Action in Dayton (LEAD) and Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), both supported by CCHD, have stepped in to provide low-income parents with tools to become active participants in the decisions that affect their communities. They have trained parents to organize others in their community, identified adverse factors affecting their lives, carried out information and media campaigns, and built relationships with decision makers and other stakeholders to bring about change.

As Robert Lewis of LEAD put it, "external actors" often step in to tell a community how to solve its problems. But organizations such as LEAD and COFI believe what we at CCHD believe: that to break the cycle of poverty, those who are affected must be included in the decision-making process.

Thanks to your generosity, CCHD has been able to work with these wonderful organizations that help parents have a say in what may seem small issues—such as food choices and quality in school cafeterias—as well as a say in more complex challenges like childhood trauma and its behavioral effects that can determine a child's educational success.

By listening to parents' voices, LEAD and COFI embody CCHD's vision of empowering people at the grassroots rather than by imposing top-down solutions that don't consider the unique needs of the communities they serve. This approach helps parents address issues earlier in their children's development, which leads to improved outcomes and more positive impacts for both the children and their families.

In East St. Louis, Illinois, and Dayton, Ohio, the featured CCHD-funded organizations not only work for lasting change but also give a voice to those struggling to be heard. It is a pleasure to share them with you.

RALPH McCLOUD, Director
Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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

we are doing is the opposite of that. We are working with parents of children who live in the community.”

These efforts have resulted in big and small victories.

In Chicago Public Schools, where recess was abolished many years ago, efforts by COFI and similar organizations helped a group of low-income parents who were concerned about what the lack of physical activity and social interaction—which recess once provided—would mean for their children.

“COFI, working through a regional coming-together of these different parent groups, was able to advocate for and get recess for all of the elementary children in the Chicago Public Schools,” Robert recalled.

Parents created a guide for principals as well as a media campaign, all touting the benefits of recess. Ultimately, they succeeded in getting recess back into the schedule at Chicago schools. But the best byproduct is that the effort taught parents what they could accomplish when they banded together.

So when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, parents knew how to come together to talk to school districts and decided to make “some very strong recommendations during COVID on how children and parents should be treated . . . and those were adopted,” said Robert. “It has so much to do with the voice of parents working together where they can bring about this kind of positive change in the community.”

More recently, LEAD has worked with parents from one elementary school with the area’s highest rate of expulsions and suspensions of kindergarten children. Organizers asked parents to identify concerns about the education and development of their children. They then launched a project focusing on children’s mental health and childhood trauma.

After a counselor told them that 90 to 95% of the children at the school had

“**Watching parents thrive and lead regarding matters that affect them and their families feels rewarding. Support from entities such as CCHD is crucial to their growth.**”

experienced childhood trauma, parents spent a year learning about the issue to see how it affected their own children, Robert said.

They discovered how much trauma was affecting their children. “Often, in situations like that, the school may not be very attentive to the fact that it’s childhood trauma, but simply see it as children acting out,” Robert said. “Unfortunately, sometimes that means that the children get punished for acting out.”

After interviewing with the school’s principal and examining its procedures, parents made three recommendations. First, they wanted a forum where they could share with the larger community what they had learned about childhood trauma and why it was so important. Second, they wanted the school to

provide parents with information about dealing with childhood trauma. Finally, they wanted the school to become what is called a “trauma-informed school.”

“There’s a national program that focuses on how schools need to modify their behavior to see the child’s behavior as a result of their trauma, and know that there are approaches that the school could learn to handle them,” Robert explained. The goal is “understanding that a child acting out is a result of trauma, and that there’s a way to deal with that that is more affirming and positive.”

Trauma-informed schools provide training for the entire staff, including administrators, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and anyone else who deals with children—instructing them in how spot



Parents United for Change hosted a press conference to raise awareness about fines and fees in public housing.



➔ Continued from page 3

and deal with behavior that may be the result of trauma.

These efforts and the implementation of their recommendations showed parents that they can work together to address issues that affect their families.

CCHD funding also helped the group hire a community organizer—a former early childhood teacher committed to social justice work—to organize parents. She works with them directly to design a curriculum of leadership development.

CCHD funding has also expanded COFI's work beyond Chicago to help parents in other cities in Illinois to develop better and stronger communication with their school districts.

Esther Beard, a lead organizer with COFI, said CCHD funding in East St. Louis, Illinois, helped the organization work on campaigns dealing with school discipline and truancy. In some of the district's schools, parents were being penalized when their children were not showing up for virtual learning.

"We were advocating for parents to have better communication with the local district, and to also be a part of the decision-making process during remote learning or virtual learning," she said.

These campaigns helped the district focus on how best to support parents instead of looking for a punitive solution. As a result of increased communication, parents also organized to ask for better school meals for their children after they returned to in-person school following pandemic lockdowns.

"When they returned back to school, the quality of the school meals kind of went down a little bit more than what they usually are," Esther said.

"Parents began to meet with school district officials, looked at comparable school meal plans around the state, studied what other children were being served, and then began providing recommendations. After a meeting, the parents were invited to be a part of a wellness committee within the district. That campaign led parents to expand

their efforts to seek access to healthy food within the community in general. Over this last year, 2023-2024, they've expanded and really been thinking about, 'OK, kids are getting fed in school, but what happens when they go home?'" Esther said.

Those conversations were taking place as some grocery stores began closing in their neighborhoods, including one predominantly Spanish-speaking community, where limited transportation hindered locals' access to fresh and healthy food found elsewhere.

"So the school meals campaign kind of expanded into food access overall. And this year, the CCHD money will support us in doing site visits to co-ops, grocery stores and urban farms and local farms to try to build some type of collaboration or coalition where we can work together and have either a community, a co-op grocery store . . . or farmers' markets that we can set up," Esther said.

COFI's efforts to empower parents began by recruiting them. "Then we help them to recognize the power within themselves and that they are leaders. We start to teach them some foundational skills, doing outreach and recruitment. They learn how to collect data, to learn more about the issue that they want to work on. Then they'll do a community town hall where they'll bring community organizations and members together and share with them what they've learned," She continued.

"Instruction for parents also includes thinking about systems, policy change, and strategy so that, as a group, they can map steps toward common goals. It really teaches them that organizing is about building relationships and also strategizing: What are the steps we need to take? Who do we talk to? What other things can we be doing? Do we have all of the people in the community involved? And how do we get them involved? And things like that.

Watching parents thrive and lead regarding matters that affect them and their families feels rewarding," Esther



Parents United for Change members gathered for outreach about access to meals for children during summertime.

concluded. Support from entities such as CCHD is crucial to their growth.

For Robert, the work of empowering parents in vulnerable situations is about more than individual victories. It's about ensuring the continuation of efforts that make lasting and important change. But it's also about putting power in the hands of those who can discern together what their communities need most.

"It has so much to do with the voice of parents working together where they can bring about positive change in their community," he said. "It's an inside-out approach rather than an outside-in. And the issues that parents choose to work on are theirs. They identify what it is they think is important for them to address." ❁



AN INITIATIVE OF THE
CATHOLIC CAMPAIGN FOR
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

*More than 37 million
Americans live in poverty.*

POVERTYUSA.ORG
POBREZAUSA.ORG