News

Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minn., speaks June 13 at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Spring Plenary Assembly in Louisville, Ky. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

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Less than two weeks after many U.S. bishops made a strong show of support for the conference's domestic anti-poverty initiative, staff members from that initiative and others were laid off on June 24 as part of a restructuring of the wing of the conference that supports Catholic social teaching.

Chieko Noguchi, the spokesperson for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, confirmed layoffs and a restructuring of the department of Justice, Peace & Human Development in a statement to Religion News Service. "The reorganization will allow the Conference to align resources more closely with recent funding trends," Noguchi wrote.

The department includes programs focused on international policy, domestic policy, environmental justice, racism, education and outreach, as well as the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, an office supervising grants to U.S. community organizations working on systemic solutions to poverty issues. The future of CCHD was a major topic of debate at the most recent bishops' meeting; however, the wider cuts to the department of Justice, Peace & Human Development came as a shock to many.

"Why in a world at war, a nation with pervasive poverty, are the leaders of the conference minimizing the Conference' commitments to overcome poverty, work for justice and pursue peace?" asked John Carr, the former director of the department for more than 20 years, in an email to RNS.

Richard Wood, a sociologist and president of the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies at the University of Southern California, called it "a disinvestment in important Catholic mission work."

"Cuts are sometimes necessary for fiscal reasons, but these particular cuts weaken an infrastructure for the broad mission of the church that's been built up over decades that a lot of people care about passionately, including a lot of young Catholics," Wood said.

Multiple people with ties to the conference told RNS they had been informed staffing across the department was cut by 50%. Noguchi did not provide further details about the number of staff laid off and the initiatives they had worked on.

"We're grateful for the time and dedication of Conference staff and recognize that transitions are difficult; as this is a personnel matter, further detail will not be discussed at this time. Please join us in praying for these colleagues," Noguchi wrote.

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Several former leaders of JPHD offices questioned the financial rationale for the layoffs and restructuring.

"It’s about mission, not money," said Carr, who now serves as founder of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University. "It's whether the bishops' conference continues to prioritize issues of poverty, justice and peace or retreat to focus on internal matters."

Stephen Colecchi, who led the Office of International Justice and Peace, one part of the department, from 2004 to 2018, told RNS that the national collection funding international policy work had recovered since a decline in donations due to the pandemic. "In fact, all the collections are recovering," he said.

"I don’t see how the financial argument works," he added.

"I don't think there’s been a 50% decline in the collections. This is a 50% cut," Colecchi said.

The National Catholic Reporter reported that the Catholic Campaign for Human Development’s 2022 collection had seen a $2 million increase from 2021, bringing the collection back to the range it had occupied from 2017 to 2019.

Colecchi, who saw his own office cut by a third during his time with USCCB, argued that the cuts would “cripple the ability of the international office to do a credible job" and that other elements of the department’s work on peace, justice and human rights would suffer.

"The church throughout the world relies on the church in the United States to help direct U.S. policies in ways that are helpful to reducing poverty, reducing conflict, improving health care and education through foreign aid," Colecchi said, explaining that the office's staff travels to visit the church in countries experiencing conflict or poverty to hear directly what they need, giving them "enormous credibility with public officials here in the United States," he said.

Colecchi pointed to the U.S. church’s work supporting the church in Africa as an example of an effort he was concerned would be harmed by the cuts. "The President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, PEPFAR, will come up for reauthorization and will we have the bandwidth to really take that on?"he asked, saying that the church in Africa had "begged" the office to make sure the embattled program could continue, including as part of a church-run program in South Africa.

Colecchi, who also previously administered CCHD as a diocesan director in the Diocese of Richmond, said he expected that not only the international work, but also CCHD's domestic anti-poverty work, would be similarly impacted by the staffing cuts.

Noguchi clarified the status of CCHD in the USCCB’s statement to RNS. "While staff of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) have been affected, the national collection itself and the decision to award grants are separate and distinct from yesterday’s announcement. In the interest of good stewardship, the administration of the collection is being reorganized to allow for more efficient management. The CCHD Subcommittee will continue its work," she wrote.

The statement from USCCB referenced the recent discussions about CCHD, which occurred when the bishops met in Louisville, Kentucky, less than two weeks ago, where many bishops expressed strong support for the program. "As Archbishop (Timothy) Broglio said at the time, 'in all these discussions, the bishops ongoing commitment to the vital work of fighting poverty was clear,' " Noguchi noted.

Wood, who previously served as a pro bono adviser to the bishops’ conference on CCHD for about eight years, said, “For the layperson sitting in the pew and donating to the Church, there looks to be a disjuncture between these cuts and the bishops’ strong support for CCHD and JPHD at the bishops conference last week.

"That raises questions about governance inside the USCCB today. Those questions need to be answered for the sake of the Church we love," Wood wrote.

Carr echoed those questions. "Who decided this, who was consulted, why were bishops unaware of this massive disinvestment in its social mission?" he asked.

A smaller, separate office of Government Relations is outside the affected Justice, Peace & Human Development department. In it, five staff focus on influencing government policy on religious liberty, anti-abortion issues, marriage, migration, racism and Catholic education.

Noguchi did not respond to follow-up questions about the decision-making process behind the layoffs.

Wood said that while “there’s a risk here that young adults see this as the way that they’re losing the thing they love best about the Catholic church,” the layoffs and reorganization present an opportunity for lay Catholics.

"There's an opportunity here too for lay Catholics to step into the breach and advance this work in new ways outside of the USCCB structure as a kind of act of Catholic mission in the world," he said.

Read this next: Questions swirl as US bishops' conference cripples justice office with layoffs

A version of this story appeared in the **July 5-18, 2024** print issue under the headline: Bishops' conference announces major major layoffs to social justice department.