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Troy received a special delivery club dropped off more than 152 at local businesses. This is the astor Rev. Timothy Ennis, O.Carm.,



NEEDY CHILDREN IN other countries will get a boost this holiday season from the many parishes in the Albany Diocese participating in Operation Christmas Child through Samaritan's Purse, which sends shoeboxes of gifts. Above and left, 100 youth and adults from St. Michael the Archangel parish in South Glens Falls pack 70 boxes.

SURVEY RESULTS

We must reauthorize TANF: Needy still require support

BY RICHARD S. ZAZYCKI

It has yet to be decided when Congress will reconvene for the "lame duck" session, but one thing is for sure: Our congressional representatives must enact legislation to reauthorize the TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) program before funding runs out by the end of this year.

Circles of Mercy is a Rensselaer ministry of the Sisters of Mercy that aids persons in need, particularly women and children. This past summer, Circles of Mercy and 10 of its TANF client families were asked by NETWORK (a national Catholic social justice lobby based in Washington, DC) to participate in a survey.

They were surveyed along with 800 other interviewees (which included families with a total of 1,300 children) from 70 U.S. social service agencies.

The TANF survey and this reauthorization period offer a unique occasion for supporters, advocacy groups like NETWORK and other national Catholic social justice organizations to press Congress for revisions that will make TANF more accessible to the mothers and children the program is intended to serve.

These lobbying groups will be working to make certain that the best of TANF is retained, and that changes make TANF a more useful and realistic program for meeting the needs of those among us with the least financial stability.

In 1996, TANF replaced traditional "welfare," so states received block grants to fund programs that provide support and services to families. After almost 15 years — and one extension in 2005 — TANF regrettably remains an imperfect part of the nation's safety net for low-income families with children.

Many of the families served by

Circles of Mercy continue to be severely impacted by the ongoing recession, so they file for the TANF federal safety net program, administered through the county Departments of Social Services.

Some Circles of Mercy clients were asked to provide feedback via the TANF survey on how well the program was assisting them, particularly during the current economic crisis. The NETWORK survey findings were no surprise, because many of these issues are faced every day by our clients and the many that are supported by other social service agencies.

- The survey noted:
 - TANF fails to help enough people in poverty. Families that are eligible do not receive assistance, and many of those who have transitioned to being employed have been unable to rise out of poverty.

- The "Work First" (welfare to work) emphasis is difficult when there is a state of high unemployment and jobs with low wages. Initially, the program effectively helped families find work; however, due to the economic downturn, it has not been as successful as it once was.

Many clients were not working at the time of the survey. Some had been laid off or fired. For many who had jobs, their positions did not provide enough finances to meet all of their basic needs — the so-called "working poor."

- Even with access to food stamps and other nutrition programs, too many people struggle to pay for enough food to feed themselves and their families.

Hunger remains a critical issue; many have experienced food shortages in the past year, and local social service organizations running food pantries have seen an increase in clientele in the past two years.

- Limited access to education



and quality job training prevents many low-income people from finding jobs that lift them out of poverty.

Although education can ensure long-term economic stability for a family, such prospects are still out of reach for many low-income individuals. Many respondents had not finished high school; some commented that low education and lack of job training were barriers to employment opportunities.

- Many people in poverty face serious hurdles that hinder their ability to secure employment and government help. Searching for employment and government assistance is taxing for many low-income families due to barriers such as lack of transportation and child care.

Spanish-speaking clients who participated in the survey noted greater challenges to accessing employment, public benefits, education and other services.

There is no doubt that the survey results will be further studied and evaluated, particularly in light of the significant impact that the economic recession has had on all of us, especially the poor and disenfranchised.

Hopefully, this time around, the information the TANF survey obtained will assist those on Capitol Hill by giving them insights on lessons learned and how best to improve this important safety net program, which desperately needs to continue assisting the most vulnerable of society.

(Richard Zazycki resides in Rotterdam and is a Mercy Associate and executive director of Circles of Mercy. For more information on NETWORK, visit www.networklobby.org/issues/economic-justice.)