

Diocese' new CRS chapter is hopefully just the beginning, organizers say

By **CHRIS ORLET**
Editor

Many Catholics are unaware of all the good works undertaken beyond our borders by Catholic Relief Services.

A new initiative seeks to change that. CRS has recently undertaken a new national strategy to raise awareness and promote its mission of ending global poverty.

Part of that strategy involves creating a network of local chapters to mobilize Catholics and others of goodwill. The local chapters—comprised of students, parishioners, and others—are similar to St. Vincent de Paul Society Chapters.

“It is a new way that CRS is trying to build momentum among Catholics in the U.S.,” Cheryl Sommer said. Sommer is the Diocese of Belleville’s CRS animator.

Chapter members are charged with encouraging elected officials and the media to highlight and support CRS’ life-saving work. They also work to address the systemic causes of global poverty through advocacy, by developing relationships with their members of Congress, visiting their offices, and writing letters to the editor and op-eds to raise the profile of pivotal issues like forced migration and malnutrition.

Myrt Rollins, one of the CRS Solidarity Team members and a retired Edward Jones employee, said a lot of Catholics are not aware of the good work being done beyond our borders.

Rollins, who has been involved with CRS as a donor for 13 years, said the new chapters will have an intense focus on advocacy and fundraising in order to get the word out about CRS’ good works. “Their good works means a lot of me,” he said.

Following four in-depth training sessions, the CRS Midwest Regional Office recently commissioned the Diocese of Belleville’s first chapter. Sommer says she hopes to eventually have two chap-



Helen Vahlkamp of St. Mary Parish, Carlyle, a frustrated quilter during the COVID-19 pandemic, recently donated a beautiful quilt to be raffled off by Catholic Relief Services. (Submitted photo)

ters in the diocese, one in each congressional district. Eventually, she hopes to have a chapter in each vicariate—for a total of five chapters.

“The reason that our next step is to form a chapter in each congressional district is because one of the two purposes of CRS Chapters is to advocate for U.S. policies that have a positive impact on people living in poverty around the world,” Sommer said. “An important task

of each chapter is to build a good relationship with their representatives and senators.”

CRS is currently working to get the Global Child Thrive Act passed. The act would integrate early childhood development into development and emergency humanitarian programs serving vulnerable children and their families, helping them recover from the COVID-19 virus and building their resilience to future emergencies and trauma.

“We are thrilled that it passed the U.S. House of Representatives without opposition,” Sommer said. “We are grateful to Rep. Mike Bost (R-IL) who met with us and who signed on as a cosponsor. Now we are hoping that the legislation will also pass in the Senate.”

CRS leaders from the Diocese of Belleville recently met with Sen. Richard Durbin (D-IL) who also agreed to cosponsor the legislation.

Fundraising

A second purpose for the new CRS Chapters is to raise money for CRS’ human development work in more than

100 countries.

“With the global pandemic, hunger is already on the rise and is expected to go higher,” Sommer said. “Having funds to do our work is more critical than ever.”

The new chapter has already scheduled a Belleville-style fundraiser—a quilt raffle featuring a hand-stitched quilt, made by a parishioner of St. Mary Parish, Carlyle.

With COVID-19 shutting down so many normal activities, including parish picnics and quilt bingos, there are a lot of frustrated quilters around the diocese,” Sommer said. “They have no one in need of the beautiful quilts that they are used to donating to these events.”

Fundraising coordinator Linda McNurlen reached out to one such frustrated quilter, Helen Vahlkamp of St. Mary Parish, Carlyle, to ask where the CRS Chapter might buy a quilt to raffle. Vahlkamp was so delighted to have someone ask her about a quilt that she immediately donated the quilt.

“Helen told me on the phone today, ‘I just can’t sit there and do nothing. I was taught to work,’” Sommer said. “She really was so very happy that her work was helping other people around the world.”

“This quilt is a wonderful convergence of frustrated quilters needing something to do and to share their beautiful work with the tremendous growing need of so many people in poverty during the global poverty,” Sommer said.

Training

CRS Chapter members receive specialized support and training as well as intensive skill building from CRS staff. They are educated on current global issues and have access to faith formation resources. Chapters are connected to a nationwide network of CRS champions working to advance global peace and justice, and they have opportunities every month to put their faith into action and make a difference in the world.

After that a CRS Community Engagement Manager works with local leaders to gather a group of interested people who attend a Chapter Launch Workshop where participants learn what it means to be part of a chapter. Those who choose to join the chapter are trained by CRS. After the trainings, chapters come together monthly for a national conference call featuring a guest speaker, Q&A, best practice sharing and ongoing training. Individual chapters meet a second time each month for fellowship and to plan their actions around giving and advocacy.

If you are interested in starting a local chapter, contact Cheryl Sommer at cherylsommer@yahoo.com.

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