

Day laborer group loses church funding over marriage equality

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Voz Workers' Rights Education Project, Portland's day laborer organization, was recently faced with a difficult decision: Either pursue a promising \$75,000 grant through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, or forfeit the money and stay in solidarity with equal rights.

It chose equal rights. It was an easy decision for the group, but a tough conclusion to a long relationship.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, or CCHD, is the national funding arm of the Catholic Church for grassroots, member-led organizations such as Voz. It has supported Voz for years and helped fund Voz's worker center on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. The \$75,000 grant proposal would have helped Voz fund leadership development, organizing and education to combat wage theft, a common problem among day laborers.

El Hispanic News broke the story earlier this month that Voz had withdrawn its application after CCHD urged it to drop its affiliation with the National Council of La Raza because NCLR supports marriage equality. NCLR is the nation's largest Latino civil rights organization and is currently advocating on behalf of the recent wave of undocumented children crossing the border from Mexico.

"Basically we said we stand for NCLR and we stand for values, and we hope that CCHD will one day stand with us," Ranfis Villatoro, development director with Voz told Street Roots. Villatoro said the request by CCHD came as a complete shock, considering they were already working to alleviate concerns about the affiliation. "This was over a conference call. They told us, if you guys want the grant, you'll have to disaffiliate with NCLR. If not, you can stick with NCLR, but you won't receive any funding."

In a letter to CCHD, Voz's Board of Directors — which had previously never taken a stand on marriage equality — said it remained committed to NCLR.

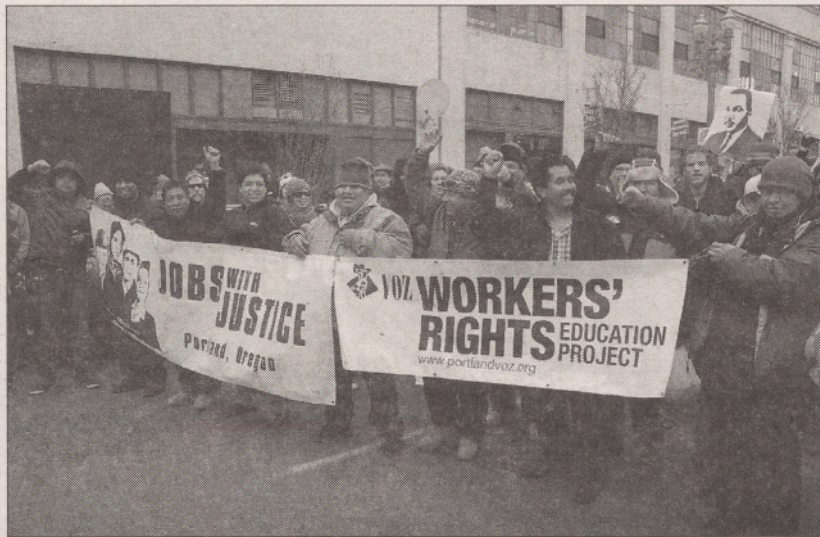
"After much deliberation within our board, we have decided not to terminate our affiliation with National Council of La Raza," the letter states. "We understand that maintaining affiliation with NCLR, a champion of Latino rights, will terminate any possibility of receiving the CCHD National Grant we submitted requesting \$75,000."

The grant would have been a significant infusion to Voz's \$310,000 annual budget. "The need for funding is great," the letter states. "However, we are a worker-led organization that empowers immigrants and day laborers to gain control over their working conditions. At the root of that mission is the pursuit of justice and equality for all immigrants and day laborers."

To accomplish that, the letter states, requires all allies standing together in unity, and likened breaking up partnerships as another kind of border against progress.

"The philosophy behind building borders between friends and allies has long been a debilitating instrument to slow the advancement of social justice and equity," Voz's Board of Directors said. "Alone we cannot achieve anything."

And they are not alone. The announcement by Voz has drawn the support of not only the NCLR, but also Basic Rights Oregon, the Latino Network and Hacienda in Portland. Basic Rights Oregon and Freedom to Marry made a financial contribution of approximately \$12,500 to the organization to offset the loss.



Members of Voz Workers' Rights Education Project march in a recent Martin Luther King Jr. parade in Portland. The group was declined funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development because of its membership with a national organization that supports marriage equality.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VOZ

The day laborers themselves also convened to talk about what was at stake and come to a consensus before making a decision.

"No one knew what that conversation would look like going in, but I think it was a powerful moment just to see everyone come together and unite and agree that what CCHD was asking us to do was wrong," Villatoro said.

The relationship between immigration rights and LGBT rights is not connected by circumstance. Immigration rights advocates are calling on the reunification and support of Latino families across borders, and that includes those in the LGBT community. The National Council of La Raza formally voted two years ago to support marriage equality as a matter of civil rights.

"There are hundreds of families in our community who need our help. It has been a fundamental issue when you have same-sex partners that you don't have the same rights to petition for your spouse," says Lisa Navarette with NCLR. "That's the reality of it and the civil rights aspect of it. ... We cannot be an organization that condones exclusion."

Navarette said her organization even wrote a letter to CCHD saying that not all members are aligned with every NCLR agenda item. But it was not enough.

"Of course we're not going to align completely on our agendas," Navarette said. "We've worked with Grover Norquist and evangelical groups. The mish-mash of organization ranges from far right and far left. Allies are allies."

In fact, the governing body for CCHD, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, has worked with La Raza on immigration issues, according to Navarette, who called the bishops "stalwart" in their support of immigration reform. "The decision with Voz over marriage equality is disappointing," Navarette said.

Matt Cato is the director of the Office of Life, Justice and Peace, which administers the Campaign for Human Development through the Archdiocese of Portland. He said the Catholic Campaign for Human Development is disappointed that Voz withdrew its consideration for a national and local grant.

"The criteria for a grant from the U.S.

Bishops' Catholic Campaign for Human Development are clearly stated in the pre-application, application, and on the CCHD website. A local CCHD grant contains the same criteria." That includes a statement that "CCHD cannot fund groups that are part of coalitions or other organizations with purposes or agendas that conflict with fundamental Catholic social and moral teaching."

Cato also said that the Archdiocese continues to support Voz.

"Voz's withdrawal from consideration for a grant with CCHD will not diminish the public and active support of the Office of Life, Justice and Peace on the core efforts of Voz."

Voz isn't the only group whose affiliation with NCLR has been called into question, according to Navarette, and that includes at least one other Latino organization in the Willamette Valley that declined to talk on the record.

"Right now, there have been a couple of isolated incidents to threaten the network or the organization. We'll be mindful of that because we treasure these partnerships. We're so much stronger united and working together than as individual organizations. It's paramount for us."

Nationally, CCHD is a major player in the anti-poverty world. Founded in 1970 by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, it is the anti-poverty, social justice arm of the Catholic Church, with a mission to address the causes of poverty through community-controlled, self-help organizations and education. It is funded through a specific annual collection in parishes across the country, and this year granted more than \$14 million to anti-poverty organizations in the United States.

The national CCHD offices, based in Washington, D.C., did not return Street Roots request for comment by press time.

Hacienda CDC was in its second year of a two-year grant with CCHD when it received a call from the grantor asking about its affiliation with NCLR as well. The grant funding the start of its Latino Mercado. Hacienda retained its membership in NCLR

and its CCHD grant, which runs out this September. Merced said they probably wouldn't apply for another.

"To go through these moral hoops with them (it's not worth it)," Merced said. "While we have a pretty good relationship with the Catholic Church here, we will go elsewhere to find the money."

In recent years, CCHD has been under pressure from right-leaning groups saying the CCHD is awarding grants to organizations whose agenda is in conflict with Catholic teachings, a violation of the terms of its grants. In 2010, Street Roots reported on the trend by CCHD nationally to defund or refuse grants to organizations that affiliate or partnered with groups that supported gay rights or abortion. That included Street Roots, which was told it could not receive funding for listing Planned Parenthood in a resource guide of local services for the poor. Likewise, left-leaning groups see CCHD's approach as extreme in denying funding on a "guilt by association" platform that interferes with community organizing.

In 2013, in a case recorded in the Chicago Tribune, CCHD cut off funding to eight Chicago-area groups who continued their affiliation with the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, or ICRR, after the ICRR voted to support same-sex marriage on its political agenda.

Last summer, John Gehring, a former staffer at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, authored an extensive report that detailed the history of CCHD's work and documented pressure campaigns from Catholic groups like the American Life

League, which have led to an increase in de-funding of CCHD grantees with any association with other organizations that support marriage equality.

"Conservative attacks on the bishops' anti-poverty campaign have intensified from well-organized opponents who think the church should stick to charity and ignore the fact that Catholic social teaching also requires a response to the structures that perpetuate injustice," said Gehring, now the Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life, an advocacy group in Washington, D.C.

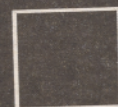
"Bishops are in a tricky situation as the culture shifts beneath their feet and acceptance of same-sex civil marriage grows rapidly," Gehring said. "The challenge is how can CCHD protect its Catholic identity without pulling away from the kind of effective coalitions that are needed to empower low-income communities and that put Catholic teaching into action. Navigating this can be complicated, but it's a major blow for community organizing and a real loss for vulnerable families if more dioceses make the decision that they can only associate with individuals or organizations that agree with Catholic theology on every issue. Pope Francis keeps reminding us that the church should be out in the streets, getting bruised and dirty, not withdrawing from the messiness of the world. Catholic identity is not only about church teaching on sexuality and marriage. The essence of being a disciple, the pope tells us with his words and actions, is living out Jesus' commandment to stand on the side of the poor and marginalized."

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Dignity



Poverty