

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CIVIL RIGHTS AND HUMAN SERVICES**

March 22, 2021

**Ending the Cycle: Examining Ways to Prevent Domestic Violence and Promote Healthy
Communities**

**Ami Novoryta
Chief Program Officer, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago**

Chair Bonamici, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify on how Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago strives to prevent domestic violence and promote healthy communities.

Catholic Charities is one of the largest social services providers in the Midwest, and I am here today as Charities' Chief Program Officer. Over the last two decades, I have worked within community and faith-based institutions alongside public sector partners to support vulnerable populations.

For 104 years, Catholic Charities has served and accompanied anyone in need in Greater Chicago. Every year, Charities' helps nearly 200 survivors of domestic violence and those at high risk through emergency shelter, safety planning, counseling, legal services, and transitional housing. Our wrap-around services and partnerships help survivors and in many cases their children improve stability and restore security.

Pre-pandemic, we knew that people experiencing domestic violence in Illinois were 95% women, 55% Black, and 13% Latinx. Forty-three percent resided in Chicago and 40% were low-income.

The survivors we serve at Catholic Charities Chicago face staggering challenges. One hundred percent live below the federal poverty line. They come to us as survivors of intergenerational trauma. They fear losing their children. They often have prolonged exposure to substance use and are experiencing homelessness or housing instability. Almost universally, they are in poor physical and emotional health.

Survivors are often isolated due to cultural factors, language barriers, lack of familial support, and lack of awareness of their lawful protections. Moreover, they have inadequate support once they leave the abusive situation.

It is often the church, and Catholic Charities, to which survivors turn. The role of trusted, faith-based providers in this service arena is profound.

We are finding that COVID only compounds the struggles faced by survivors. Since the pandemic began, the Illinois Domestic Violence Hotline reports a 15% increase in calls and a 2,000% increase in text messages requesting help. Additional burdens include financial stress, unemployment, isolation, increased family conflict, and deepening mental health issues. For persons experiencing domestic abuse, lockdowns and other COVID restrictions have forced them to spend more time with their abuser and less time with their support networks, increasing survivors' difficulty trying to flee.

A grim reality is that flight from an abusive situation often leaves survivors without a place to call home. In response, Catholic Charities operates two transitional housing programs for domestic violence survivors. While families are in a safe environment, Charities supports them on their journey toward healing and recovery with a long-term goal of securing permanent housing and stable employment. We offer free legal services including facilitating orders of protection and court representation in matters of child support and custody.

Although survivors may reside with us for up to two years, families typically transition after 12 to 14 months. Once a one-year housing agreement is secured, Charities arranges for the family to move into its new home. With Charities support, survivors arrive with a truckload of furniture, household supplies and clothing, and often with savings between \$2,000 and \$3,000.

Most important is their increased self-sufficiency and their deep connection to a supportive, faith-based community. Our presence continues in many survivors' lives through after care programming. For instance, past residents attend support groups, in English and Spanish. Survivors continue coming to us for food, clothing, school supplies, and other necessities.

Even through COVID, 100% of the survivors we have served remained in stable permanent housing. Prior to COVID, 68% sustained full-time employment; today employment is an ongoing struggle. Moreover, since the pandemic, Charities has seen a 25% increase in survivors coming back to us for basic necessities. Some may not have worked with our team in years – but our doors remain open.

This winter, we began offering new services for survivors of domestic violence on the Westside of Chicago, where African American and Latinx communities have been hardest hit by COVID. Our staff offer trauma-informed counseling and intensive case management. We are collaborating with churches, hospitals, and others to expand access to free, confidential services for survivors. Together we are helping people regain control of their lives and begin their healing process.

Our shelters and healing recovery programs help survivors rebuild their lives with hope and dignity. Thank you for this opportunity to lift up our work before you today.