Isolating and measuring the role and scope of Catholic institutions in the social services sector faces an array of problems. Definitions lead the list. While there are certainly many nonprofits focused on particular social services issues – e.g., foster care or substance abuse – many organizations found in other “sectors” are equivalently involved. The social workers in hospitals, for example, are first lines of defense in identifying child abuse, yet the statistics and philanthropy directed at their work will not be found in the “Social Services” category of Giving USA.

Second, even if definitional problems could be solved, sorting out the role of Catholic institutions is nearly impossible. There is no professional or institutional association for Catholic social services institutions akin to that for education or hospitals. Hence, there is no regular data collection nor membership structure. Moreover, social services can be provided by institutions belonging to religious orders, and therefore there is no required reporting for Form 990 purposes.

How do we then benchmark the trends in the sector? The best place to begin is with Catholic Charities USA, #13 on the Forbes list of the 50 largest U.S. charities. Catholic Charities USA is the national office of more than 160 local charities and programs in all dioceses and archdioceses of the nation. Together, these programs annually reach 8.7 million Americans in poverty and personal crisis. The estimate is that there are 43 million Americans living in poverty, implying that Catholic institutions serve two of every five Americans in poverty.

In terms of revenue, Catholic Charities USA reported $4.34 billion in 2013. Nearly two-thirds of this sum came in the form of government support, up from 25% in the 1960s, reflecting government’s increased emphasis on partnership with private nonprofit service providers. Only about 18% of revenue was from private charitable contributions. Clearly, Catholic Charities USA plays a central role in public support for the nation’s underprivileged. Fifty-seven government agencies are now contracted to reach those living in poverty through Catholic Charities USA.

Beyond these specific diocesan/archdiocesan efforts, Catholic religious orders often have dedicated programs focused on poverty, such as the Society of St. Edmund and its Edmundite Missions program in the deep South of the United States, which serves over 1,000 meals a week to those in need and hungry in Selma, Alabama. Other Catholic social services agencies focus their efforts on families, such as Good Shepherd Services in New York City, with its foster care and homeless programs. As with Catholic Charities USA, many (but not all) of these programs are funded with a combination of government program payments and private philanthropy.
In 2014, Changing Our World, in collaboration with its 2014 Fellow in Religious Giving, conducted a survey of faith-based nonprofits in social services in five cities, Houston, Raleigh, San Diego, Pittsburgh and Omaha. The objective was to assess the position of faith within the social services community, and the implications for giving. The study focused on organizations with $75,000 or more in revenue. As demonstrated on the graph on page 14, the study demonstrated that faith-based agencies account for a larger portion of dollars spent on social services than would be expected from their relative presence in the nonprofit market. Moreover, in these five locations, the faith-based agencies raised about a quarter of a billion dollars per year in philanthropy. If we apply the sample structure to the total nonprofit structure in social services, Changing Our World estimates that faith-based social services organizations raise about $9 billion annually in private contributions. While this is not limited to Catholic organizations, it does give a sense of scale and scope.

There are many innovations in social services and social finance creating new revenue resilience and sustainability in the social sector. For example, nearly two dozen Catholic Charities around the country are using social enterprise concepts to combine job training and work experience for the underprivileged with the creation and marketing of related products and services to enhance revenue sustainability. Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, created by Fr. Gregory Boyle to address gang formation, now trains 300 young men and women annually and prepares them for productive lives. These innovations are not only extending the reach and capacity of Catholic agencies in addressing social problems, they are providing philanthropists, particularly young venture philanthropists, with new opportunities to support both service to the poor and institutional sustainability.

The Catholic social services network in the United States is the largest faith-based service network in the nation. Catholic institutions serve entire communities, regardless of religion. The face of poverty alleviation in America is a Catholic face.

There is a need in the Catholic community to create a mechanism that can reach across all types of Catholic institutions that are focused on poverty alleviation and social services, and knit them together as both a professional group and as a learning group. While Catholic Charities USA plays this important role for the Catholic charities system, there is not a deeper center around which to orbit all manner of Catholic social services and experience. There is also no nation-wide “roll up” of service data to provide a national service picture. This associative function would also provide a mechanism for fundraising and for philanthropists to have a full and complete view of the span and depth of the Catholic role in community problem-solving in the nation.

The ability to articulate system-wide statistics and a return on investment is increasingly more important in fundraising. New generations of donors have been “trained” by the marketplace to expect immediate results and assess every dimension of a purchase or investment and compare alternatives instantly. When it comes to charitable donations, why should their expectations be different? Nonprofits that can provide comprehensive and easily accessible pictures of their performance will occupy pride of place in donors’ perceptions.
WHAT YOU CAN DO

The role of fundraisers is to act as the translators between funders and programs, helping program officers understand the views of funders and helping funders understand the objectives of programs. In an era of emphasis on impact relative to exceedingly complex and long-term problems, fundraisers face a huge opportunity – to become leaders of innovation, providing an intellectual bridge between funds and programs, helping to craft creative solutions to match funder expectations with the realities of program complexity. This translational and innovator role is increasingly needed, and a fundraising professional that understands not only the tactics and strategies of fundraising, but the intricacies of social finance, social entrepreneurship, and performance assessment, can help negotiate productive and lasting relationships between new donors and programs in those terms.

**ARTICULATE YOUR VALUE**

Catholic foundations are increasingly looking for a return on their investment. They are looking not simply to make grants to Catholic causes, but to see solutions and sustainability. This means that fundraisers need to build closer relationships with human service program officers. They must communicate to program officers the viewpoints of major funders and, in a collaborative fashion, help to build a bridge between program decision-makers and funders.

**REACH BEYOND THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY**

The focus for fundraising and leadership development for Catholic social services nonprofits should truly be community wide, not just within the Catholic community. This includes corporate partnership and support. The work of Catholic institutions is the base of social solutions for entire communities, and development strategy should reflect that scale.

**CONSIDER PARTNERSHIPS TO INCREASE SCALE & IMPACT**

The new relationship between Catholic Charities USA and the University of Notre Dame is an important precedent to help understand impact and improve advocacy. Equivalent partnerships between Catholic Charities in dioceses and archdioceses, or between other types of Catholic service organizations and academic institutions could help bolster the case for support by demonstrating independently assessed results.