

# Faith-Based Service Providers in the Nation's Capital: Can They Do More?

*Tobi Jennifer Printz*

Welfare reform has prompted policymakers to turn to nonprofit organizations—religious congregations, in particular—to increase their assistance to the needy. Congress has encouraged faith-based groups to enhance their role in serving the poor at a time when little is known about the services they now provide or about their capacity to meet increased demand. To begin filling this information gap, the Urban Institute's Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy surveyed the religious community in the greater Washington, D.C., area in summer and fall 1997 to examine the services it provides and its capacity to expand them.<sup>1</sup>

The 266 religious congregations that responded to the survey provide over 1,000 community services.<sup>2</sup> About three-quarters of the responding congregations provide short-term emergency services including food, clothing, and financial assistance. Because of limited financial and human resources, they are much less likely to provide long-term or professional services such as job training or substance abuse treatment. Much of the \$19 million that

responding congregations spent on services and programs in 1997 came directly from congregation members and individual donors. Only two-thirds of the responding congregations were able to estimate the number of people they served, but they reported serving a total of over 250,000 individuals in 1996. As for congregations' capacity to expand their services, the majority of survey respondents believe they do not currently have the facilities, staff, or funds to satisfy an increase in demand; about one in five congregations report already operating at full capacity. Below are more detailed survey findings.

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## What Kinds of Services Are Congregations Providing?

Almost 95 percent of responding congregations provide some type of service or program. Of these, more than 75 percent offer an emergency service such as food, financial assistance, clothing, day or overnight shelter, or a soup kitchen (see table 1). Most congregations provide short-term emergency services, with almost 60 percent offering emergency food.

Nearly half of all responding congregations offer some type of family service such as child care, parent education, or senior services.

The services least often provided by congregations are those requiring professional staffing or those that are capital intensive. Fewer than 5 percent of all responding congregations reported offering child welfare, day shelter for the homeless, foster care, legal services, medical services, mental health services, transitional housing, or vocational or job training.

## How Do Services Differ Between City and Suburbs?

Emergency food is the most frequently offered service by both District of Columbia and Maryland/Virginia suburban congregations. The frequency with which other types of emergency services are offered differs by geographic location, however. In the District, clothing provision is the second most commonly offered form of aid; in the suburbs, emergency financial assistance is the second most commonly offered service. More District than suburban congregations offer senior services (30 percent versus 19 percent), and more suburban than District congregations offer child care (32 percent versus 24 percent). Another urban/suburban divide is reflected in educational programs. Tutoring and mentoring are offered nearly twice as often by District congregations as by their suburban counterparts. Tutoring is provided by 28 percent of congregations in the city and by 15 percent of those in suburban Maryland and Virginia. Mentoring is offered by 21 percent of urban and 12 percent of suburban congregations.

## What Populations Are Served?

The majority of religious congregations in the Washington, D.C., area offer services to anyone in need. About 70 percent of all congregations serve low-income individuals and

families. The typical congregation among this group reported that 90 percent of the people it served were low-income. But the poor are not the sole priority: almost half of all congregations reported providing services to individuals with moderate incomes.

More than one-third of congregations offer services to the residents of their community. One in three congregations in the District offer services to people referred to them by third parties such as other religiously affiliated or secular nonprofits, compared to one in six congregations in the suburbs. Only 19 of the 266 congregations in the sample reported limiting services to their members only.

## Who Charges for Services and Why?

Most services are free to people seeking assistance, but about a quarter of congregations charge for their services or programs. Child care is the only program for which the majority of religious congregations charge a fee. Of the 79 congregations that offer

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child care, 50 percent of those in the District and 57 percent of those in the suburbs charge a fee. Most charge a fixed fee for services, but a quarter use a sliding scale. A handful of congregations suggest donations.

Of congregations that charge for services or programs, more than one-third cite increased operating costs as a reason for the fee. More than half of the congregations that charge fees reported that the nature of the program necessitated some type of mon-

etary exchange, such as rent for transitional housing or fees for preschool or child care. Some also reported that charges were in place to build a sense of responsibility or an independent character among recipients.

## How Do Congregations Fund Their Social Services?

The aggregate budget for responding congregations' community services and programs in 1997 was over \$19 million.<sup>3</sup> Although this is a significant amount of money, it appears more modest when calculated on a per capita basis: on average, congregations spent \$76 for each person who came to them for assistance that year. Of the two-thirds of responding congregations with formal budgets, the median amount allotted for these services and programs in 1997 was \$15,000.

Money from congregation members and individual donors (who may or may not be members of the congregation) made up nearly 70 percent of the aggregate budget of responding congregations (see figure 1). Almost half of responding congregations received all of their funds for community services from congregation members.

Only 11 of the 266 congregations in the sample received government funds, which constituted about \$75,000, or less than 5 percent of the aggregate budget of responding congregations. Denominational headquarters and foundations provide significant resources (more than \$900,000) to faith-based social services, but this money is received by only a few congregations. Forty-five percent of congregations accept in-kind donations of food or clothing, at an estimated value of \$1.1 million.

Roughly one in three congregations reported having no formal budget in place for their community services. This does not mean that they do not spend money on services, but that they were unable to quantify the resources used. Individuals completing the questionnaire may have felt uncomfortable about reporting funds for which detailed records were not kept.

**Table 1**

**Community Services and Programs Offered by Religious Congregations in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area**

<i>Type of service</i>	Washington, D.C. (N=67)	MD/VA Suburbs (N=199)	All Congregations (N=266)
<i>Emergency</i>	81%	76%	77%
Clothing	52	35	40
Day Shelter for the Homeless	4	3	3
Emergency Financial Assistance	31	58	52
Emergency Food	57	59	59
Overnight Shelter	12	9	9
Soup Kitchen	13	6	8
<i>Family</i>	48%	44%	45%
Child Care	24	32	30
Child Welfare	3	3	4
Foster Care	3	2	2
Parenting Education	16	18	17
Senior Services	30	19	22
<i>Educational</i>	31%	22%	25%
Mentoring	21	12	14
Tutoring	28	15	18
Vocational/Job Training	4	2	3
<i>Professional</i>	15%	10%	11%
Legal Services	7	2	3
Medical Services	3	3	4
Mental Health Services	1	0	1
Substance Abuse Treatment	7	6	6
<i>Other</i>			
Counseling	40%	48%	47%
Transitional Housing	6	3	3

Source: The Urban Institute, *Survey of Community Services and Capacity in the Metropolitan Area*.  
 Note: Percentages do not equal 100 because congregations could check *all* responses.

## How Do Congregations Staff Their Service Programs?

Congregations rely heavily on volunteers to run their service programs. The 85 percent of the sample (230 congregations) that responded to this question estimated that they used more than 20,000 volunteers in 1996. The typical congregation operates its programs with one paid full-time staff member, two paid part-time employees, and about 50 volunteers. Almost a quarter of congregations have no paid full-time

employees. Roughly 10 percent of congregations use consultants for their outreach programs; this group used a median number of two consultants.

## How Are Faith-Based Organizations Likely to Respond to Increased Demand or Decreased Resources?

About 40 percent of responding congregations are already experiencing an increase in demand for services; the

median increase reported was 10 percent. When asked about the future, one-third of congregations predicted an increase in demand for emergency food, and one-quarter foresaw an increase in demand for emergency financial assistance. Only four congregations believed that the demand for their community services would decrease.

Many congregations in and around Washington, D.C., turn people away or refer them elsewhere because they do not provide the requested service or are already operating at full capacity. In D.C., 40 percent, and in

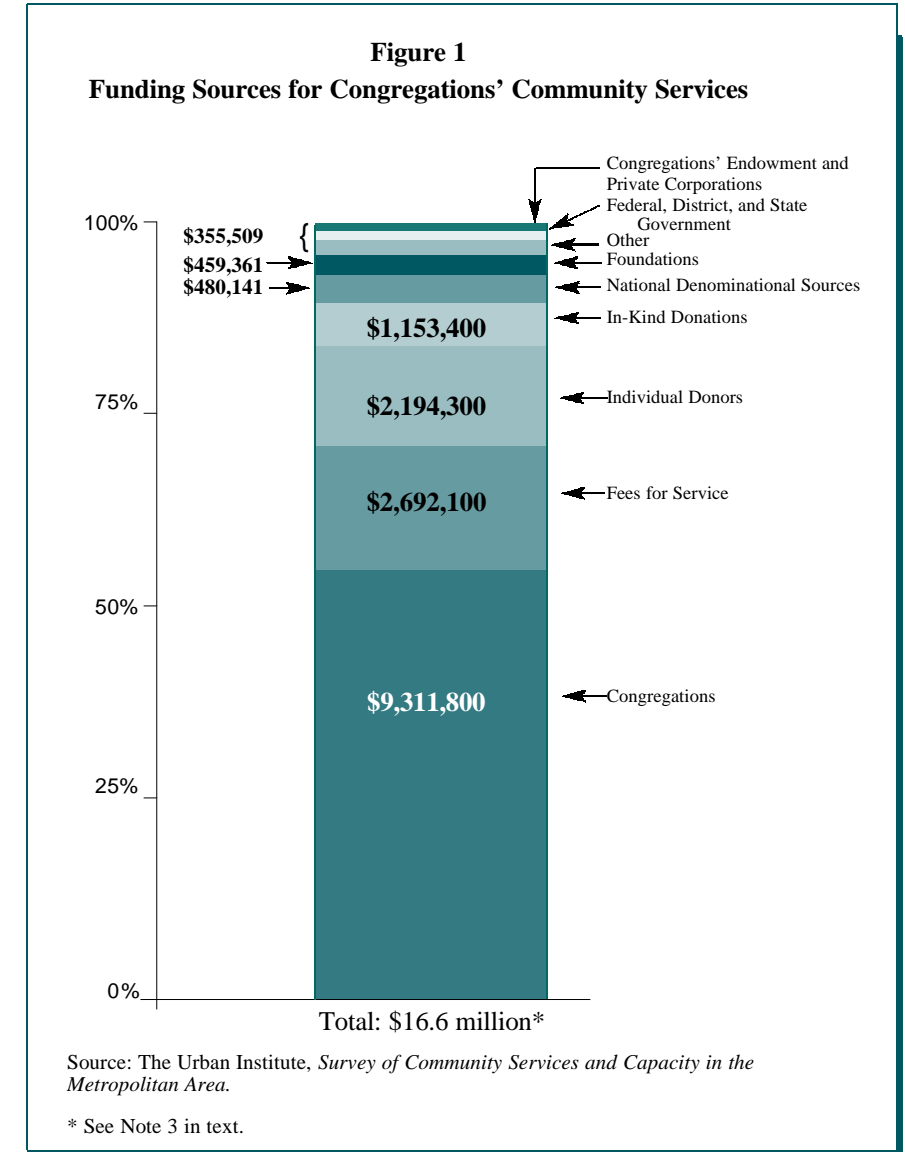
the suburbs, 58 percent, of congregations turn people away because they do not provide the requested service. Almost one-fifth of congregations turn people away because they are already operating at full capacity; these congregations tend to be the larger congregations (with more than 1,000 members) and those with the greatest number of programs. Nearly one-quarter of all large congregations and 30 percent of those offering seven or more programs report being at full capacity.

Despite an increased budget in 1997 (see note 3), the majority of congregations are already experiencing difficulty satisfying an increase in demand for community services and programs (figure 2). However, compared to congregations in the District of Columbia, those in the Maryland and Virginia suburbs report less confidence that they have adequate facilities and staff to meet increased demand, but more confidence in their ability to raise additional funds. More than 60 percent of congregations in the District and the suburbs feel they do not have the facilities, staff, or funding to satisfy an increase in demand for services.

If the financial resources available to congregations decrease, many would be forced to cut back their service provision. One-quarter of congregations report that they would decrease the number of services offered, and about 15 percent would reduce the number of hours services are offered. Nearly half claimed they would collaborate with other groups (religious or secular), a number that may reflect a politically correct but inflated response. When asked how they had responded to decreased resources in the past, a much smaller percentage (13 percent of District and 18 percent of suburban congregations) reported collaborating with other groups.

## How Does Faith-Based Service Provision in the Nation's Capital Compare to That Elsewhere?

Some of our survey findings confirm those of the few other researchers who have studied outreach within the faith community. First, our Washing-



ton, D.C., area survey showed that 95 percent of religious congregations perform outreach within their communities. Cnaan (1997) found that 91 percent of the religious congregations in six cities studied offer community programs. Second, the predominance of emergency services provided by faith-based organizations in the Washington, D.C., area also has been found in other local studies. One study of faith-based groups serving the black community in Michigan reported that 75 percent of religious providers offered emergency services (Jackson et al. 1997). Cnaan (1997) found that 60 percent of congregations surveyed offered food pantries and 53 percent offered clothing banks. Similar proportions of emergency services were found in a study of United Methodist churches in Michigan (Grettenberger and Hovmand 1997).

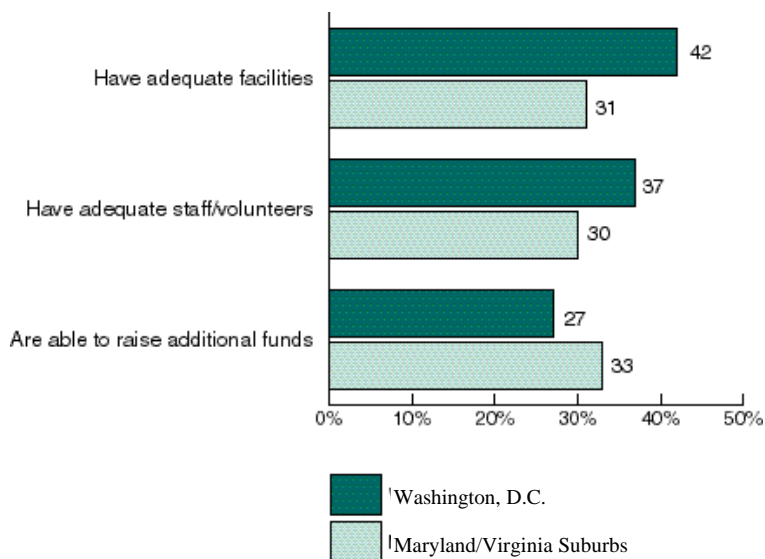
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The survey findings reported here should be interpreted with some caution. Collecting information from religious congregations is challenging because many do not keep detailed records, do not have the time or staff to complete a survey, or may not want to disclose information through a survey or interview. Some congregations do not offer formal social service programs but provide volunteers, space, or money to a secular or religious nonprofit organization that does. Others offer whatever services are necessary to help an individual or family in need, but do so on a case-by-case basis rather than through an ongoing program.

Despite the difficulty of collecting accurate data from congregations, heightened expectations of what faith-

**Figure 2**

**If Faced with Increased Demand for Programs or Services, the Percentage of Congregations That . . .**



Source: The Urban Institute, *Survey of Community Services and Capacity in the Metropolitan Area*.

Note: Percentages do not equal 100 because congregations could check all responses.

based organizations, in conjunction with government, can do for the poor call for a better understanding of their program capacity. The welfare reform act of 1996 contains a “charitable choice” clause that enables faith-based organizations and religious congregations to compete for government contracts to provide social services. The law allows them to do so without masking their religious character. At the same time, it requires faith-based organizations that receive government funds for this purpose to respect recipients’ religious freedom and to keep detailed financial records so that the use of these public funds can be monitored.

But faith-based organizations may be unwilling or unprepared to respond to public funding opportunities. Some may be wary of crossing a line between church and state, some may be hesitant to assume mandated financial reporting requirements, and some may not have the staff or information needed to apply for government funds.

The Washington, D.C., area study points to other questions that need to be asked here and around the country. For instance, is faith-based service provision effective beyond the alleviation of immediate need? Does a spiritual component significantly alter outcomes for recipients of congregation-provided services? How many congregations are aware of the charitable choice clause in the welfare reform law? Do congregations have the capacity to provide prolonged support to welfare recipients and the working poor? Answers to these questions will give us a more realistic picture of the extent to which religious organizations can help to fill the gap in the safety net.

## Notes

1. This research was supported by the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington and the United Planning Organization (the District of Columbia’s community action agency).

2. The response rate was 25 percent of roughly 1,100 congregations surveyed, or 266 congregations. Of these, 40 percent (or 106) are located in Maryland, 35 percent (or 93) in Virginia, and 25 percent (or 67) in the District of Columbia.

3. There is a discrepancy between the 1997 figure of \$19 million and the \$16.6 million comprising the total in figure 1. This is because when respondents were surveyed about funding sources, they were not asked to define those sources within a particular year. It is likely that some respondents supplied funding sources that corresponded to their 1996 budgets and others to their 1997 projected budgets.

## Related Reading

Castelli, Jim, and John D. McCarthy. 1998. *Religion-Sponsored Social Service Providers: The Not-So-Independent Sector*. Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute Nonprofit Research Fund.

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Jackson, Jr., Maxie C., John H. Schwitzer, Marvin T. Cato, and Reynard N. Blake. 1997. “Faith-Based Institutions’ Community and Economic Development Programs Serving Black Communities in Michigan.” Presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Actions, Indianapolis, Indiana.

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