Preparing children to go back to school is a time of financial strain for many of our families who need to purchase clothes, shoes, school supplies, etc. This late summer, as in past years, all seven of our regional offices provided back-to-school support for needy families in their areas primarily through backpack programs. As described here, each of these programs has developed somewhat differently but show common elements of collaboration involving businesses, church groups and civic groups.

Catholic Charities of Chemung/Schoharie organized its Annual Back to School Giveaway providing 350 backpacks with supplies to children in Chemung and Schoharie Counties. In addition, 56 kids received free haircuts while at the giveaway. In Schoharie County, the giveaway event also included crafts such as iron-on patches for their new backpack, personal care items and books to school supplies. In Chemung, children were able to choose new sneakers and fall coats. Allison said of her experience in Schoharie County: “I enjoyed the crafts to make – especially picking out the backpack iron-on. My friend and I both love sparkly folders, notebooks and cool pencils and are ready to kick off our first year at middle school! Thank you!” Agency leadership extends special thanks to its presenting sponsor Chemung County Excel BCBS, and to its volunteer staff and donors. This year, at its Annual Back to School Event, held on August 12th, Catholic Charities of Livingston County distributed 248 backpacks to children in need throughout Livingston County. Local businesses, church groups and private donors came together to provide needed supplies. While many children were absolutely ecstatic and thankful to receive the supplies needed to begin their school year, the story of one little girl stands out. “Life” approached the table of supplies, she was so excited to pick out items she needed. She eagerly looked through the backpacks and chose the perfect one with characters on it from the movie “Frozen.” Her face lit up as she thanked staff members and told us “Frozen” was her favorite movie.

Catholic Charities of Steuben County expresses its thanks to the businesses, organizations and individuals who donated supplies, resources and time to their 2016 Back to School Drive. The agency’s TurnPoint program helped more than 310 students in Bath area schools districts and 174 students in Hammondsport school districts have a successful start to their 2016-2017 school year. Each student with both backpacks containing school supplies and vouchers for haircuts. In Bath, Corning incorporated volunteers organized by United Way of the Southern Tier. Helped fill back packs with supplies and Assemblyline Phil Palmasono joined four other volunteers to help hand out backpacks. Many other businesses helped in both locations. Steuben County Rural Ministry now offering TurnPoint programs in Corning, provided socks and underwear to 100 children in 79 households. Canastota Wesleyan Church, First Presbyterian Church, Canastota First United Methodist Church, and First Baptist Church each held an “Undie Sunday” to collect underwear and socks for the drive.

In partnership with Pepisco and Tops, Catholic Charities of Wayne County, the backpack program was organized through the Wicomico Community Clothing Center. A Catholic Charities program led by volunteer Jill Lee and supported by many other volunteers. The program has grown steadily over the past few years, and this year was able to provide 250 backpacks. Residents and other volunteers, the Department of Social Services, Catholic Charities of Wayne County, organized its Annual Back to School Giveaway, providing 310 backpacks filled with school supplies. A retired volunteer organizes supplies from local businesses and organizations and recruits college students so fill the backpacks. Catholic parishioners and the Salvation Army in Troups County donated boxes and boxes for giveaway in Nickerson.

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Assembling gifts for students from Steuben County choose items for her new backpack. Students from Hampden Troups and Chemung Schoharie show their new backpacks.
Catholic Charities of Tompkins/Tioga County

“...but I’m safe here...”
Lisa Riley says of her current home. Lisa is a grandmother, restaurants owner and Catholic Charities free clothing closet guest at a site at the agency’s new transitional home program. She is also a recovering drug user whose decades-long substance abuse led to her homelessness.

A few months ago, she found out about “A Place to Stay,” a Catholic Charities of Tompkins/Tioga County housing program based in a residential neighborhood downtown Ithaca. Through “A Woman Building Community” grant from the Ithaca-County Federal Credit Union, Catholic Charities of Tompkins/Tioga County was able to rent and furnish a lovely newly renovated home to provide housing for up to two women who need stability before they can move to. In the past four months, the program has helped two recipients and is now close to early 50’s.

“A Place to Stay” is designed to provide women with a safe, serene home for 90 days along with the support and guidance they need to find and maintain their own permanent housing. When people are no longer homeless, housing assistance, ‘going home’ going to place to place’ or living in their cars, they can focus on attaining addiction recovery treatment, saving goals and planning for their future. Lisa notes that the year she was going to a “A Place to Stay” motivate others to each stay sober and off drugs. Community spirit is built through cook-in’s in the backyard, clearing their home together, and meeting each other’s family members when they stay. Recently, one guest brought her friends well-behaved dogs for a visit to the house. One of Catholic Charities Steuben’s former volunteers is, of course, her three-year-old granddaughter.

“A Place to Stay” is meant to feel like home but is transitional in nature serving as a stepping stone to recovery. Catholic Charities staff members have arranged for horses to come to the property to conduct dressage classes in the field. A program of Financial Credit Counseling is also available to help program participants who need ready to seek employment will be given guidance in a variety of areas. A program called “Faith in Focus” in the program draws to a close, the agency assists our guests in securing our own affordable housing. Catholic Charities of Tompkins/Tioga County staff are honored to have helped make it possible for Cathy to work towards a new home. She is gearing up to take her GED and is planning to study to become a drug and alcohol counselor. She is proof of how life can be altered.

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"When we let our hearts be moved by God’s mercy, it changes everything," said Timothy Cardinal Dolan, of New York in his statement launching the year-long Respect Life Program. Moved by Mercy Cardinal Dolan is the chair of the Committee on Pro-Life Activities of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). The full text of Cardinal Dolan’s statement is available along with many other resources at www.usccb.org/respectlife.

As we finish out the Year of Mercy, it’s so appropriate to consider being “moved by mercy” in a variety of concerns involving the Common Life Ethic. As Cardinal Dolan said in his statement, “From each tiny child waiting to be born, to individuals nearing death, all are precious and deserve our care and protection.”

“Women and men suffering after abortion, individuals tempted to end their lives, couples longing to conceive a child, people pushed to the margins of society by a ‘throwaway culture,’ expectant mothers facing challenging pregnancies, and every other person—each has a place in God’s heart from all eternity,” Cardinal Dolan said, citing Pope Francis’ 2016 apostolic exhortation, ‘Laudato si’.

“Pope Francis observed that ‘every human being is in God’s heart from all eternity’,” Cardinal Dolan said, citing Pope Francis’ 2016 apostolic exhortation, “Laudato si’.”

Cardinal Dolan is referring to the six articles in this year’s Respect Life Program, which address each of these situations. The articles address the tragedy of assisted suicide, nurturing infertility, facilitating healing after abortion, and end of life care, attentiveness to God’s creation, and support for birthmothers.

Project Rachel has been facilitating healing after abortion in the Diocese of Rochester for 20 years now, thanks to enthusiastic support from many individuals, parishes, and groups across the diocese. Project Rachel Coordinator Deacon Dave Snyder at depondr@diocese.org. You can also call Suzanne Stock, Life Issues Coordinator at 585-338-3120 x1304.

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Catholic Charities of Chemung/Schuyler organized its Annual Back to School Giveaway providing 150 backpacks with supplies to children in Chemung and Schuyler Counties. In addition, 56 kids received free haircuts while at the giveaway. In Schuyler County the giveaway event also included crafts such as iron-on patches for their new backpack, personal care items and books to school supplies. In Chemung children were able to choose new sneakers and hair accessories. Allison said of her experience in Schuyler County: “I enjoyed the crafts to make – especially picking out the backpack iron-on. My friend and I both have sparkly folders, notebooks and cool pencils and are ready to kick off our first year at middle school! Thank you!” Agency leadership extends special thanks to its presenting sponsor Chemung County Excelus BCBS, and to its volunteer staff and donors.

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Catholic Charities of Steuben County expresses its thanks to the organizations, businesses, and individuals who donated supplies, resources and time to their 2016 Back to School Drive. The agency’s Turning Point Program helped more than 250 students in Batavia area school districts and 174 students in Hamlin area school districts have a successful start to their 2016-2017 school year, equipping students with backpacks containing school supplies and vouchers for haircuts. In Batavia, Incorporator volunteers coordinated by United Way of the Southern Tier helped to fill backpacks with supplies. Catholic Charities of Steuben County is the largest provider of back to school programs in Steuben County.

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Catholic Charities of Wayne County, the backpack program was organized through the Whirlpool Community Clothing Center, a Catholic Charities program led by volunteer Jill Lee and supported by many other volunteers. The program has grown steadily over the past few years, and this year was able to provide 250 backpacks.

A retired restaurant owner, local Catholic and evangelist group, the Moose Lodge, local businesses, individual donors and volunteers, and members of the Cornell University Lacrosse team all played a role in making Catholic Charities of Tompkins/Tioga Counties Backpack Giveaway a great success. Between the Whirlpool office in Tompkins County and the Nickel office in Tioga County, the agency distributed 330 backpacks filled with school supplies. A retired volunteer organized donated funds from local businesses and organizations and recruited college athletes to fill the backpacks. Catholic parishioners and the Salvation Army in Tioga County donated boxes and boxes from Giant in Ithaca. A厄anthony Palmena helps student from Steuben County choose items for her new backpack.