

# Among Boston nonprofits, federal funding unknowns causing trepidation

By **Danny McDonald** Globe Staff, Updated March 5, 2025, 6:25 p.m.



Beth Chambers (second from left), vice president of basic needs at Catholic Charities Boston, distributed ashes to parishioners during an Ash Wednesday Mass at St. Cecilia Roman Catholic Church in Boston. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Beth Chambers's message to the faithful gathered at St. Cecilia Parish in Boston's Back Bay Wednesday morning was a simple one.

"This situation is unprecedented," she told the scores in the pews who were there for Ash Wednesday services.

Indeed, the direction of President Trump's new administration has meant that federal funding for legal advocacy contracts for Catholic Charities, the nonprofit where Chambers serves as vice president of basic needs, was halted and reimbursements withheld without warning, she said.

Advocates of nonprofits, such as Catholic Charities, worry the Trump administration's attempt to temporarily freeze federal grants and loans, which a federal judge temporarily blocked last month, could throw trillions of dollars into limbo.

Trump wants the Republicans who control Congress to approve a massive budget bill that would extend tax breaks, which he secured during his first term but are expiring later this year, while also cutting spending across federal programs and services.

And some of the region's largest nonprofits worry that any budget tightening will hurt Greater Boston's most vulnerable and marginalized.

Just last week, the federal government halted a contract with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops that allowed fully vetted refugees fleeing harm to resettle in Boston.

In every church in the Archdiocese of Boston, collection envelopes were placed to try to shore up funding for Catholic Charities' services, which range from food pantries to child care to shelter to workforce development.

Every human, Chambers told the parishioners, is worthy of human dignity.

“Any amount makes a difference,” she said.

Her plea came hours after Trump addressed Congress in a speech in which he spoke of a “common sense revolution” that would provide “immediate relief to working families.” He seemed, at times, to revel in slashing funding for programs he deemed absurd while heaping praise on Elon Musk and his newly created Department of Government Efficiency for making those cuts. Much of the rhetoric was anti-immigrant. For instance, he railed against “illegal alien hotels in New York City.”

“America is back,” he said to start his speech.

The mood was decidedly different at St. Cecilia’s. After the Mass, Chambers said her organization’s immigration and refugee resettlement services are of the most immediate concern, although she said, “It seems like each one of our departments’ is going to be hit in some way or another.” She said her organization was poised to help refugees who were ready to come to the United States and had purchased plane tickets but did not make the trip because “everything stopped.”

The organization, which serves 100,000 people in the Boston archdiocese annually, has not had to lay off anyone, yet, but Chambers, her forehead smudged with a cross of ash to mark the start of Lent, said, “We’re just waiting and playing it day-by-day.”





Beth Chambers, vice president of basic needs at Catholic Charities Boston, distributed ashes to a parishioner during an Ash Wednesday Mass at St. Cecilia Roman Catholic Church. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Catholic Charities is hardly alone. Anxiety has recently riddled local nonprofits who rely on federal funding, as many wonder what the future will hold for their services to the vulnerable and marginalized, given the direction federal Republican leadership is heading.

“Yes, basic services could be on the chopping block,” Lyndia Downie, president and executive director of Pine Street Inn, the largest homeless services provider in New England, said last week. “There’s a lot of anxiety about what happens next. There are a lot of what-ifs, but I don’t think people know yet.”

Downie said about 20 percent of her organization’s housing program funding comes from the federal government. It’s her understanding that projects for next year involving federal money will be funded, but she also acknowledges that there are multiple unknowns.

Greater Boston Legal Services, which provides legal representation to the poor and the working class, called a proposed funding freeze and possible cuts disheartening.

“This funding isn’t government waste, it represents real and needed services to help people put food on the table, receive healthcare, and remain in their homes,” said Jacquelynne Bowman, the executive director for the group, in a statement in recent days. “GBLS, like many human services organizations, is waiting to see what will happen not only to federal funding, but how this will impact the state and other resources that enable us to do our work.”

Regarding the GOP budget package, next steps are long and cumbersome before anything can become law — weeks of committee hearings to draft the details and send the House version to the Senate, where Republicans passed their own scaled-back version. In the meantime, there is trepidation.

Count Boston resident Michael Kane, chair of the Leaders and Organizers for Tenant Empowerment Network, a national organization of tenants in privately owned, federally subsidized apartments, among those who are troubled by recent federal developments.

Kane fears that Trump's administration will aim to slash housing services and hike rents for the underserved, as it tried pre-Biden.

During Trump's first term, Russell Vought, the director of the US Office of Management and Budget, proposed to phase out all HUD rental subsidies for 9 million Section 8 and public housing tenants over a decade. His proposal looked to start with a 22 percent rent hike to millions of low-income tenants in the first year, but the plan never came to fruition.

He specifically mentioned Musk, Trump's billionaire adviser, who is tearing through federal agencies with his Department of Government Efficiency firing thousands of workers nationwide.

"Are Musk's proposals to slash 48 percent of [US Department of Housing and Urban Development] staff in the next few months, a preview of what the administration will propose when the President files his 2026 budget in the next few days?" asked Kane days before Trump's Tuesday night speech. "Our elderly tenant members, in particular, are worried that OMB could again propose to raise their rents by 22 percent, terminate 250,000 tenants from Section 8, and make deep cuts for disaster recovery, public housing, and housing grants to cities, like they tried to do in 2019."

*Material from the Associated Press was used in this report.*

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