



Legislative Agenda of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul

National Voice of the Poor Committee

During these difficult budgetary times when there is increased concern over the Federal deficit and spending, it is vital that programs serving the most vulnerable are encouraged for the common good.

Hunger

All persons should have adequate food and safe drinking water to nourish their bodies. This is essential to the dignity of the human person.

US Hunger: The Society of St. Vincent de Paul supports:

+ EMPOWERMENT. We support adequate funding for health and nutrition programs that serve food insecure individuals and families.

- Strengthen the Food Stamp Program, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, to better assist the working poor and elderly.
- Extend Food Stamp eligibility to more single adults and more working families.
- Protect funding for essential food programs that serve low income families, such as The Emergency Food Assistance Programs such as TEFAP, which provides critical funding for food banks to operate and the Emergency Food and Shelter program (EFSP).
- Base monthly benefits on an updated measure of what families need, such as options that provide access to more nutritious food.
- Allow families to participate without forfeiting the opportunity to save.
- Ensure that federal nutrition programs meet the unique needs of low income rural families.
- Aid with simple sanitation basics, such as soap. (Personal cleanliness is important for health.)
- End the five-year waiting period for adult legal immigrants who in a time of need would otherwise be eligible for food stamps.
- Repeal the current provision penalizing low-income families headed by a parent (usually a single mother) with a past drug conviction.

+ ACCESS. Food assistance programs need to be easily accessible to those who qualify. This includes:

- Outreach improvements that reduce the complexity and stigma in the application process.
- Promote outreach efforts at national, state and local levels.

+ EDUCATION. We support stepping up education efforts regarding eligibility along with simple registration procedures to those eligible for food assistance programs;

- Provide adequate education (e.g. based on the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and current infant feeding practice guidelines of the American Academy of Pediatrics).

The eradication of extreme poverty and hunger must be a priority. It is the responsibility of individuals, communities, and nations to work together.

World Hunger: The Society of St. Vincent de Paul supports:

+ Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger by 2015.

- Prompt and effective emergency funding of food programs to alleviate immediate suffering is critical. This includes quickly responding to the newly hungry in disasters.
- Flexibility is needed to allow the use of currency or commodities in fighting hunger abroad.
- Agricultural development assistance. Increase U.S. support to assist developing countries to further their investments in research, extension, rural infrastructure and market access for poor small farmers.

+ Encourage global leaders to work together to investigate and promulgate realistic solutions with special attention given to the 1.1 billion who live in extreme poverty in this world making less than one dollar a day.

- World leaders must make food sufficiency and adequate access to safe, nutritious food a global priority. Without adequate sustenance the poor cannot hope to care for themselves or their families. By embracing the least with a network of charity, the entire world reaps abundant benefits.
- The economics and ethics of subsidies, such as food for fuel, must take into account the most vulnerable and make feeding the poor and hungry a priority.
- Global leaders, both public and in private industry, must focus on the mitigation of circumstances that affect safe food and drinking water, along with agricultural self-sufficiency of the poor. The promotion of sustainable agricultural practices that protect farmland, natural resources and wildlife for future generations is everyone's responsibility.
- US farm subsidy program practices that do not comply with international trade obligations and disadvantage poor farmers in developing countries must be eliminated.

The United Nations' eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) include: cutting extreme poverty in half, halting the spread of HIV/AIDS, providing gender equality, reducing childhood mortality, improving maternal health, ensuring environmental sustainability, providing universal primary education, and developing a global partnership for development by the target date of 2015. These goals form a blueprint agreed to by all the world's countries and all the world's leading development institutions. Yet limited headway has been made to bring these goals to reality.

Housing and Homelessness¹

America is facing a growing affordable housing crisis, which has displaced individuals and families into homelessness. Every person needs a safe, decent, affordable place to live. The home is the foundation for raising children, seeking comfort, and preparing oneself to participate in broader society through work, education, and civic engagement.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul supports:

- + Providing adequate funding for federally subsidized housing programs.
 - Raising the number of rent subsidy programs especially for extremely low-income households.
 - Full funding for affordable housing programs such as Section 8 and Section 202 Preserve targeting Section 8 vouchers for extremely low-income households.
- + Homeownership and strengthening programs aimed at increasing homeownership.
 - Establishing a National Housing Trust Fund.
 - Increasing permanent housing for low and moderate-income families. (i.e., National and State Housing Trust Funds).
- + Comprehensive reform of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Program.
 - Increased funding for homeless assistance programs.
 - Providing housing first with supportive services for homeless.
- + Keeping families caught in the sub-prime lending crisis housed.
- + Innovative housing alternatives that provide do-able solutions to homelessness, such as a system to match homeless families with abandoned houses. Federal government needs to work in tandem with lending institutions, others in private industry, and with social service organizations to identify prospects, solve housing problems, and provide hope for America's homeless.
- + Utility assistance programs.

Income and Assistance²

In Catholic teaching, the economy exists to serve people, not the other way around.³ We believe that every person has the right to productive work, to fair wages, and to private property and economic initiative.

Paying a just wage is a powerful witness to employers, donors, government officials, church leaders and others who are - or should be - concerned with economic justice for all people.⁴

¹ Affordable Housing for the Poor (Feb. 2002) and Position Statement on Homelessness (Aug. 2007) are found on the Voice of the Poor website (<http://www.voiceofthepoor.org>)

² Just Wage for Employees of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (April 2001), Position Statement on Fair Wages (Sept. 2005), Position Statement on Predatory Lending (April 2007) are found on the Voice of the Poor website (<http://www.voiceofthepoor.org>).

³ *Economic Justice for All*, Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy, U. S. Catholic Bishops, 1986.

⁴ A just wage is one that recognizes the value of the service provided by the employee; takes into account the prevailing economic conditions in which the business operates (but is not driven solely by market forces); allows employees to live above the poverty level in their city; and respects the whole person (e.g. recognizes that work is the normal way to provide for oneself and one's family, but is only part of a balanced life.) The term *living wage* is derived from the effort by municipalities to contract out services

Income and Assistance (continued)

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul supports:

Workers:

- All persons should have the opportunity to adequately provide for themselves and their families.
- Expand employment and training opportunities for low-income workers with an emphasis on self sufficiency, pride in work, and dignity. Government, trade associations, and private industry sectors must work together to identify opportunities, develop mentoring programs, build skill sets, and provide on-the-job training that leads to productive workers, who are fully-employed with living wage jobs.
- Encourage and promote the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Improve EITC so that it is more inclusive for more workers.

Children:

- Provide adequate funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and preserve funding for the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG).
- Improve the protection and care of abused, neglected, and abandoned children and youth.

Families:

- Improve the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program including: progress to reduce child poverty, expand employability of recipients, provide affordable, quality child care, promote adequate family income, support marriage and family life.
- Promote policies that support and strengthen families, including low-income fathers.
- Provide a significant increase in funding for the Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP) administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. (Note: The Emergency Food and Shelter Program helps ~125 SVdP Councils in the United States.)

Economy:

- Discourage the use of predatory loans that prey on the vulnerable by establishing strict guidelines for lenders.
- Encourage the development of small loan alternatives for low income communities.
- Provide opportunities which allow individuals and families to bank safely.

to vendors, e.g., janitorial, data entry, etc. To make their bids competitive, vendors cut back on labor costs. Unions and others concerned with workers' rights brought attention to this trend and began the fight for a living wage. Since that term is a political construct, we prefer the term *just wage*. Not only does it express the crux of the issue, but it highlights the need for justice in the world. (Source: Just Wage Position Statement, SVDP, Voice of the Poor, April 2001.)

Education

US high school graduation rates in the nation's largest cities are dismal - many under 50% and some in the 30 percentile, with one city below 30%. To begin to make a dent in reducing poverty the direct connection between lack of education and ability to earn a decent living must be addressed.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul supports:

- Access to quality early education for children who live at or below the poverty level. At the very least, learning must encompass basic reading, writing, math and verbal skills.
- A safe and nurturing learning environment for every child regardless of family income. Educational programs must instill the value and joy of learning while teaching self-discipline and respect for oneself and others. Parental support and involvement in children's education must be encouraged.
- Making quality education both a national and local priority. Together government and industry must respond by stepping to the plate to change the system using practical and innovative solutions to fix problems without penalizing children for inadequacies within the school system.
- Educational building blocks and a path, from primary through high school that is measurable, provides life skills, and leads to real opportunities, such as an apprenticeship program that provides a reasonable path toward becoming a master tradesperson, for technical trades or a track for college preparation.
- A preferential option for the education of children living in poverty. Opportunities that lift youth from poverty into adult independence and self sufficiency by mastering specialty skill sets that allow individuals to earn a decent wage in today's economic environment must be provided.

Neighborhood Safety

Safe neighborhoods encourage common values and a sense of community pride. Public safety, clean communities, educational opportunities, teaching the intrinsic value of every person is do-able when neighborhoods are safe. Seeking ways to remove fear and distrust among residents will go a long way in deterring crime and violence.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul supports:

- Building relationships among neighbors, community organizations, churches, city and state officials, police and fire enforcement, etc.
- Providing adequate city and county services so that neighborhoods are kept clean.
- Building peace centers, safe havens within troubled communities, can be an important first step in bridge building. Developing activities for youth to encourage their development and to create hope for a better world among people by encouraging intercultural understanding.
- Encouraging stronger volunteerism within communities. Finding opportunities for mentoring programs, such as between young and the elderly to help solve problems of isolation, build community spirit, establish a good value orientation, and begin to solve moral dilemmas encountered by those who do not have the family structure to learn right from wrong and basic core values.

Restorative Justice⁵

Restorative justice recognizes that the dignity of the human person applies to both victim and offender, and attempts to address the needs and limitations of the criminal justice system. Vincentians are called to advocate for *restorative justice* changes within the criminal justice system.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul supports:

- Programs that promote healing for victims and families involved.
- Look for real changes in the system and not the construction of additional facilities to house the incarcerated. Prison/jail facilities need to be supportive environments that encourage and reinforce positive behavior.
- Regular, ongoing counseling for the incarcerated to deal with mental health concerns along with drug/alcohol treatment.
- Education and job skill development for the incarcerated along with opportunities for meaningful employment on release.
- An improved release system that let's folks out during reasonable hours, provides clothing compatible to the seasonal weather at time of release, and transportation back into the community.
- Establish transition programs to help those who are incarcerated re-enter the community. Individuals need to learn the right value systems and have hope for the future, rather than being left isolated and alone.
- Particular attention must focus on youth in the criminal justice system. It is important to make a difference at the front end of life to help avoid a lifetime of criminal behavior.

RELATIONSHIP WITH CIVIL SOCIETY – WORK FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structures or to inadequate or unjust legislation, the Society should speak out clearly against the situation, always with charity, with the aim of contributing to and demanding improvements.

Vincentians oppose discrimination of all kinds and work to change the attitudes of those who view the weak or those who are different with prejudice, fear or scorn, attitudes which gravely wound the dignity of others.

The Society strives, with charity, to foster new attitudes of respect and empathy for the weak, so that all are able to understand, recognize and defend the right of each person to be responsible for his or her own life. The Society promotes understanding, cooperation and mutual love among people of different cultures, religions, ethnic origins and social groups, and so contributes to the peace and unity of all peoples.

--Rule of the International Confederation,
Society of St. Vincent de Paul, section 7, part 7.6, 7.7.

⁵ Position Statement on Restorative Justice (Sept. 2006) is found on the Voice of the Poor website (<http://www.voiceofthepoor.org>).

Health Care⁶

Every person, regardless of ability to pay, should have access to equitable and affordable health care. Special attention must be given to meeting the basic health needs of the Poor and marginalized. Health care reform that addresses such needs is a matter of fundamental justice and access to healthcare must be recognized as a basic human right. Developing ways to use existing resources to serve the greater good must be encouraged. Providing health care should work in conjunction with any government poverty reduction program.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul supports:

- + Providing adequate funding for health care for our nation's most vulnerable citizens.
 - Taking proactive measures to stand in solidarity with the Poor by collaborating with the Vincentian family, the Catholic Church and community-based groups on specific health issues.
 - Advocating for comprehensive health care access for the uninsured and underinsured.⁷ Support the development of a viable national health care network, particularly primary health care for every person regardless of ability to pay.
- + Maintaining the integrity and strength of the Medicaid program.
 - Consistency of service and addressing what is doable, such as a single payer plan. For example, Medicare and Medicaid are single payer plans with very low administrative rates. This is not socialized medicine.
 - Encouraging the protection of the sanctity of life by taking action, such as speaking out to encourage states to adopt Medicaid protections for the unborn and the mother.⁸
 - Legislation to facilitate enrollment of children in Medicaid and preserving Medicaid entitlement and benefits for low-income individuals.
 - Removing new restrictions to Medicaid that create barriers for low-income families.
 - Restoration of Medicaid to legal immigrants.
- + Providing adequate funding for State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) to expand coverage for all eligible children.

⁶ Health Care for the Poor (Feb. 2004) is found on the Voice of the Poor website (<http://www.voiceofthepoor.org>).

⁷ The poor should not have to choose between food, shelter and medicine. Every child should receive basic health care, which includes vaccinations and regular check ups. No child should be allowed to suffer from what are often easily treatable illnesses. Every person in need of medical help should have easy access to quality and compassionate care. Health care institutions should be encouraged to deliver just, compassionate, and quality service to the poor. Having adequate medical coverage for all means finding a way to encourage and enable health care providers to provide service. The Society will keep an open dialog with the medical community and legislators on economic issues related to universal health care. (Source: Position Statement on Health Care for the Poor, SVDP, Voice of the Poor, Feb. 2004.)

⁸ Holding the medical community to the highest standards, including ethical integrity from administration to face-to-face patient service, to medical research and development must be encouraged. While investigating ways to improve the quality of human life, scientific study must be conducted in such a way that all work honors God, the creator, and the human person. (Position Statement on Health Care for the Poor, SVDP, Feb. 2004.)

- Legislation to facilitate enrollment of children in SCHIP (State Children's Health Insurance Program) to cover children at up to 300% of the Federal Poverty Level at States' choice. (Based on population growth, S-CHIP is under funded in many states.)
 - Reforming SCHIP to make it easier for eligible children to apply.
 - Restoration of SCHIP to legal immigrants.
- + Policies that provide integrated mental health and substance abuse treatment.
 - + Promoting senior care.

Immigration⁹

The US immigration system is inadequate to meet the migration flows of the twenty-first century and all too often undermines the basic rights and dignity of the human person. This system needs reform through the enactment of legislation which provides a measure of justice to the migrant while also serving the common good of all. US immigration policies should be based upon the following guiding principles:¹⁰

- People have the right to find opportunities in their own homelands.
- People have the right to migrate to support themselves and their families.
- Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders.
- Refugees and asylum seekers should be afforded protection.
- The human dignity and human rights of the undocumented migrants should be respected.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul supports:

- + Comprehensive immigration reform that protects vulnerable individuals and families.
 - Adoption of an immigration policy that is comprehensive and provides legal status and legal avenues for entry into the United States, based on the US Bishops' document, "Strangers No Longer," and Pope John Paul II's, "Ecclesia in America."
 - Allowing undocumented who have been in the US five years and were under the age of 16 when they entered the US to have their status changed to legal permanent residents qualifying for in-state tuition and other educational benefits.
 - Addressing the status of the estimated 50% of farm workers who are undocumented by establishing a process for "earned legalization."

⁹ Position Statement on Immigration (Sept. 2004) is found on the Voice of the Poor website (<http://www.voiceofthepoor.org>).

¹⁰ Reference: "Strangers No Longer, Together on the Journey of Hope", A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration from the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States, January, 2003. Nos. 33-38.