



Society of St. Vincent de Paul Legislative Agenda 2007 National Voice of the Poor Committee¹

Mission Statement of Voice of the Poor

In the spirit of Christian love and justice, the Voice of the Poor Committee upholds Catholic values by researching, validating, documenting, advocating, and promulgating issues related to the condition of the poor and disenfranchised for the purpose of helping Vincentians to live their faith by acting knowledgeably and credibly as a unified body speaking with one voice for the purpose of building up the Kingdom of God.

Purpose of a National Legislative Agenda for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul

- To provide a framework for Vincentian advocacy both nationally² and locally.
- To focus advocacy on basic needs (food, housing, health care, income) based on Catholic Social Teaching for those we serve.
- To speak with one voice on the agenda that affects those we serve.
- To serve as a guide to Voice of the Poor Committees who select issues related to poverty based on need and interest.
- The agenda will be reviewed, at national mid-year and annual meetings, and submitted to the National President for approval prior to communication to our members.

Society Position Statements

Position papers approved by the National President and National Council (Trustees), as foundation documents for Vincentian advocacy may be found on the Voice of the Poor website (<http://www.voiceofthepoor.org>). Shown below is a list of approved position papers.

1. A Just Wage for Employees of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (April 2001)
2. Affordable Housing for the Poor (Feb. 2002)
3. Health Care for the Poor (Feb. 2004)
4. Position Statement on Immigration (Sept. 2004)
5. Position Statement on Fair Wages (Sept. 2005)
6. Position Statement on Restorative Justice (Sept. 2006)
7. Position Statement on Predatory Lending (April 2007)
8. Position Statement on Homelessness (Aug. 2007)

¹ Submitted by the Voice of the Poor Committee for Board approval 4-07. On approval to be submitted to the National Council for approval in Austin (Fall 07 national SVDP meeting).

² Until such time as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and/or the Vincentian Family have skilled representation in Washington, D.C., Voice of the Poor will rely on the expertise of staff at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and/or Catholic Charities USA to assist St. Vincent de Paul in following legislation impacting the poor.

Catholic Social Teaching

Vincentians must become familiar with Catholic Social Teaching as the Church's guide to advocacy. An excellent source is the book, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*³ A guide to advocacy (Module IV) has been developed by the National Council. There are video and workbook resources through USCCB.

(Links to related information: http://www.voiceofthepoor.org/related_sites.htm)

Voice of the Poor Priority Areas for Advocacy

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.

Housing and Homelessness

- To encourage the preservation and production of quality housing for low-income families, the elderly and other vulnerable persons; as well as the participation and partnership of residents, nonprofit community groups and churches to build and preserve affordable housing. Encourage churches, community groups, the private sector, and state and local government to do more to meet our common responsibility for housing.
(Position Statement on Affordable Housing for the Poor, SVDP, Voice of the Poor, Feb. 2002.)
- To take advantage of opportunities to speak out in favor of increasing the number of rent subsidy programs, such as expanding Section 8 programs. There is no substitute for an involved, effective, and committed federal government.
(Position Statement on Affordable Housing for the Poor, SVDP, Voice of the Poor, Feb. 2002.)

Support:

- ✓ Increasing permanent housing for low and moderate-income families (i.e., National and State Housing Trust Funds).
- ✓ 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.
- ✓ Increased funding for homeless assistance programs.
- ✓ Providing housing first with supportive services for homeless.
- ✓ Utility assistance programs.

³ USCCB. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. March 2005. ISBN 1-57455-692-4 (www.uscfc.org/publishing)

Income and Assistance

In Catholic teaching, the economy exists to serve people, not the other way around. (Economic Justice for All, Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy, U. S. Catholic Bishops, 1986.)

- People have 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

Support:

- ✓ Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF): Support improvements to reduce child poverty, improve employability of recipients, provide affordable, quality child care, promote adequate family income and support marriage and family life.
- ✓ Maintaining and extending Food Stamp eligibility. This includes:
 - Extending Food Stamp eligibility to more single adults and more working families;
 - Allowing families to participate without forfeiting the opportunity to save;
 - Providing adequate funding for Food Stamps and other nutrition programs that serve the needy;
 - Basing monthly benefits on an updated measure of what families need, such as providing families with access to quality food options — a variety of foods including fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, whole grains, and other wholesome foods;
 - Providing adequate education (e.g. based on the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and current infant feeding practice guidelines of the American Academy of Pediatrics);
 - Supporting outreach and education efforts to those eligible for Food Stamps by making Food Stamps easily accessible to those who qualify;
 - Promoting outreach efforts at national, state and local levels. Education regarding eligibility is needed along with simple registration procedures, much be encouraged.
- ✓ Providing 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.)
- ✓ Encouraging and promoting the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).
- ✓ Abolishing predatory loan practices.
- ✓ Encouraging Councils to review wages and benefits of Society's employees; work toward improvement if necessary.

⁴A 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 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.)

Immigration

US immigration policies should be based upon the following guiding principles:

- 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.

(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.)

Support:

- ✓ 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."
- ✓ Allow 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.
- ✓ Address the status of the estimated 50% of farm workers who are undocumented by establishing a process for "earned legalization."

Health Care

Developing ways to better use existing resources to serve the greater good must be encouraged.

People cannot adequately survive if they are sick and suffering. Providing proper health care should work in conjunction with any government poverty reduction program.

- To keep public officials informed of health care issues and needs of those served by the Society. Use SVDP records to document needs. Develop stories from the conferences to put a face on poverty and financial hardship caused by medical expenses.
- To advocate for comprehensive health care access for the uninsured and underinsured.⁵ Support the development of a viable national health care network, particularly primary health care for every person regardless of ability to pay.
- To take 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.

⁵ 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.)

- To encourage 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.⁶

Support:

- ✓ Preserving Medicaid entitlement and benefits for low-income individuals.
- ✓ Legislation to facilitate enrollment of children in Medicaid and 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.)
- ✓ Restoration of Medicaid and SCHIP to legal immigrants.
- ✓ Promoting senior care.

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice attempts to address the needs and limitations of the criminal justice system. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person applies to both victim and offender, Vincentians guided by the legacy of Frederic Ozanam should begin to see their role as change agents and implementers of restorative gospel values. Vincentians are called to advocate for *restorative justice* changes within the criminal justice system.

Support:

- ✓ 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.
- ✓ 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 and that provides transportation back into the community.
- ✓ Establish transition programs to help those who are incarcerated re-enter the community.
- ✓ 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.

Prison/jail facilities need to be supportive environments that encourage and reinforce positive behavior. Individuals need to learn the right value systems and have hope for the future, rather than being left isolated and alone.

⁶ 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. Every person has value. Life is a precious gift from God. From conception, to maturity, and aging the person must be honored and respected. (Source: Position Statement on Health Care for the Poor, SVDP, Voice of the Poor, Feb. 2004.)