



Let us do a little good as a Voice of the Poor

110th Congress Action Summary

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul outlined a legislative agenda for the 2007-08 year that was reviewed by staff of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops prior to approval by the National Council Trustees. Issues identified are related to the basic needs of the Poor.

While there were numerous bills brought forth in Congress and while many legislative proposals did not become law, small steps were identified to assist the most vulnerable. Bulleted sections below show some of the significant changes related to the Society's legislative agenda that were passed by Congress and signed into law. Introductory remarks for each section are from the SVDP legislative agenda.

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.¹

Signed into law:

- Legislation that increases the **minimum wage** to \$7.25 over two years, signed into law by President Bush on May 25, 2007. Low paid workers will get a well needed hour wage hike in our very weak economy.
- **Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008**, known as the Farm Bill, will be in force from October 1, 2008 through September 31, 2017. It adds an additional \$10.361 billion cumulatively to the Nutrition Title (Title IV) over a period of ten years.

¹A 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.)

The food stamp program will take on a new name SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). The Bill provides \$7.8 billion in new Food Stamp monies; \$1.26 billion for The Emergency Food Assistance program; \$1 billion for the Fresh Fruits and Vegetable program. The Voice of the Poor considered the Farm Bill a "hot topic" issue.

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.

Signed into law:

- A supplemental spending bill (H.R. 2642) that expands veteran education benefits, extends unemployment insurance, places a moratorium on six harmful Medicaid regulations, provides disaster relief for the Midwest, and provides permanent supportive housing vouchers for the Gulf Coast region;
- The **Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act** of 2008 (H.R. 6331) that blocks a 10.6 percent cut to Medicare payments.
- The **QI Program Supplemental Funding Act** of 2008 (S. 3560) that authorizes \$45 million in additional funds to assist certain low-income seniors in paying Medicare premiums.
- **President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR)** -- a five-year, \$15 billion, multifaceted approach to combating the disease around the world. This was supported by USCCB and was a Hill issue at the Catholic Social Gathering Feb 2008.

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.

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

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.

Signed into law:

- **The Second Chance Act** of 2007 (H.R. 1593) which addresses barriers to housing, employment, education, and health care that ex-offenders face when exiting the prison system. (Note: This is a start. More is needed.)

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.)

NOTE: We stand with the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and in the call for a comprehensive immigration policy that provides legal status and legal avenues for entry into the United States

Housing and Homelessness

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.)

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.)

Signed into law:

- **The Housing and Economic Recovery Act** of 2008 (H.R. 3221) that includes an Administration-backed plan to help troubled mortgage financiers Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, an expansion of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) home loan program to help homeowners avoid foreclosure, the creation of a National Affordable Housing Trust Fund to address the lack of housing options for extremely low-income families, and four billion in Community Development Block Grants for communities to rehabilitate foreclosed properties;
- A continuing resolution that includes \$5.1 billion in funding for the **Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program** (LIHEAP), doubling the FY2008 level, as well as \$22.9 billion in disaster relief, and \$200 million for Emergency Food and Shelter Fund, a \$49 million increase over FY 2008.

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.