



Voice of the Poor

H O T T O P I C S

www.voiceofthepoor.org www.usccb.org www.networklobby.org

Housing: Cost of housing has skyrocketed coast-to-coast resulting in a larger percentage of income (over 50% in many cases) required for shelter by working families. Vincentians are receiving more requests for larger amounts of emergency housing assistance. The Society's Position Statement on Affordable Housing for the Poor "...encourages the Society to speak in a unified voice in support of affordable housing locally, regionally, nationally and internationally".

The USCCB and Network urge **support** of the Federal Housing Finance Reform Act of 2005 (H.R. 1461) which could produce up to \$1 billion annually for an Affordable Housing Fund dedicated to building, refurbishing and preserving housing for very low income families.

Both organizations **oppose** the State and Local Housing Flexibility Act of 2005 (S.771) because provisions do not protect Section 8 (Housing Choice Vouchers) for lowest income families.

Medicaid: The cost of healthcare for the 50 million low income, elderly and disabled persons covered by Medicaid (generally a 50-50 matching program with the federal government) is fast becoming the largest expense for states. Members of Congress, the Administration, the National Governors Association and the National Association of Legislatures are scrambling for a plan to cut Medicaid expenditures by \$10 billion over the next five years. The Society's Position Statement on Healthcare for the Poor recommends "Councils ...support and encourage federal, state, county and city efforts to extend meaningful health care benefits to the most vulnerable".

The USCCB and Network stand firm behind a policy for healthcare that will not result in reduced care for the poor and vulnerable, especially children, and lead to an increase in the 45 million Americans without health care coverage.

Immigration: The Pew Hispanic Trust estimates that there are between 11 and 12 million undocumented persons residing in this country. The Wall Street Journal reported that unemployment has actually fallen despite the steady, growing illegal in-migration. The service industry, construction and agriculture have become dependent on cheap, illegal labor. Business interests favor immigration reform that will insure a steady supply of cheap labor. The USCCB and Network have endorsed the McCain/Kolbe/Kennedy immigration

reform bill allowing a pathway to legalization when a number of requirements are met to allow for family reunification. (See JusticeforImmigrants.org). The Society's Position Statement on Immigration, based on the bishops' document, "Strangers No Longer", and John Paul II's, "Ecclesia in America", calls for adoption of an immigration policy that is "safe, legal and orderly".

Food Stamps:

The Food Stamp Program is at a critical junction. Now is the time to speak on the need for funding for food and nutrition programs, which may be effectively cut by means of imposing a spending cap.

In May 2005, food stamp recipients totaled more than 1.5 million more individuals than in May 2004. In spite of the increasing need, the Administration Budget for FY06 called for spending caps on all discretionary programs. The House Agriculture Committee proposed cuts of \$5.2 billion over five years. The Senate budget plan requires the Agriculture Committee to make \$2.8 billion in cuts over five years. Both committees resist cutting farm programs, leaving cuts to come from food and nutrition programs, and land conservation. The USCCB calls for a "common sense" approach to farm payments which will lead to budget savings allowing funding for food stamps and conservation efforts.

For details go to http://www.voiceofthepoor.org/legislative_updates.htm and scroll to "Speak Out on Funding for Food and Nutrition Programs" for a sample letter written by Voice of the Poor, San Mateo District Council and where to get information on the subject.

Human Trafficking: Defined as involvement of coerced commercial sex or use of minors or forced labor, it is estimated that human trafficking from Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa affects up to 800,000 individuals annually, 14,000-17,000 brought into the U.S. (1/3 of this number are children). The USCCB notes that 22 national and international Catholic organizations have formed a coalition opposing human trafficking. St. Vincent de Paul has not yet taken an official position.

Payday Loans: Most recently brought to the attention of National Voice of the Poor by Oregon Vincentians, payday loans are now a \$40 billion industry according to CBS News. These storefront operations offer quick cash if the borrower has a checking account and a job. "The devil is in the details" – up to 17% interest accumulating every two weeks. Loans can be rolled over. Fifteen per cent in two weeks turns into 30 per cent per month or, worst case, 400 per cent per year. The argument is made that these loans are a convenience for people who would otherwise be unable to borrow. The problem is that when financial emergencies (car repair, medical crisis) prevent repayment on time, the accumulated interest can become a runaway expense. Have you had clients mention problems caused by this type of loan?