

## Starting and Sustaining a Voice of the Poor Committee



*“The science of charity reform is not transmitted through books and at assemblies’ tribunes as much as by climbing stairs in the home of the poor, kneeling at his bed, suffering from the same cold as he does, and discovering the secret of a grief-stricken heart in the course of a friendly conversation. When we have accomplished this ministry, not for months, but over long years; when we have thus studied the poor at home, at school, at the hospital, not only in one city but in several, and also in the country, in whatever condition God placed him, then we can start to know the formidable problem of misery, then we are entitled to propose serious measures...”*  
~ **Blessed Frédéric Ozanam, 1848**

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## Mission Statement

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 those living in poverty and the disenfranchised for the purpose of helping Vincentians to live their faith by acting knowledgeably and credibly as a unified body, speaking with one voice to build up the kingdom of God.

## How Do We Start a Voice of the Poor Committee?

Voice of the Poor is the advocacy committee of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul spearheaded by VOP committees. The emphasis is on policy and the effort is nonpartisan within the IRS guidelines for 501(c)(3) organizations.

There are currently over 80 Voice of the Poor Committees nationwide. Hundreds of Vincentians are participating in Voice of the Poor at the Conference, District and Council level in the United States. The Voice of the Poor National Committee is composed of two representatives from each of the Society's eight regions in the United States.

The following steps are offered as a suggested plan, based in part on trial and error with the Society's extensive advocacy efforts in Phoenix, Ariz.

1. Ask your Diocesan Council to appoint a "Board Liaison" for Voice of the Poor. This liaison should genuinely be interested in the Society's role as an advocate for those living in poverty. His or her responsibilities are:
  - Become familiar with the Voice of the Poor's mission, structure and protocol.
  - Learn what other communities and organizations are doing regarding poverty.
  - Stay on top of the national legislative agenda and SVdP Voice of the Poor position statements.
  - Help to publicize formation of Voice of the Poor to Vincentians, parish peace and justice committees (where they exist), and local clergy.
  - Distribute a flyer and an agenda to announce the first meeting of Voice of the Poor.
2. The agenda for the first meeting could include:
  - A motivational speaker on Catholic social teaching (the "why" behind the Society's advocacy). As an alternative, a good resource can be found at: <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/>
  - Have copies of Part 7 of The Rule ("Relationship with Civil Society: Work for Social

Justice”) for review.

- Meeting discussion should include mention of the Voice of the Poor national legislative agenda, and official SVdP Positions Statements as the “umbrella issues” for VOP at both the national and local levels.
- Sign-in sheet for all attending including (printed): Name, address, telephone, email (very important) and Conference (This is your initial roster for VOP and the VOPNET).
- Set a standing time and place for VOP meetings (monthly to start).

Other important resources include:

- Workbook and video *Serving in Hope (Module IV): Our Vincentian Mission*, available from the National Council.
- *Voice of the Poor Workbook* from the National Council.

**Always have an agenda for meetings and send it out in advance by email:  
Plan for no more than 90 minutes total.**

## The Significance of Home Visits

Through our observations and experiences during home visits, Vincentians are in a position to advocate for justice in addition to addressing immediate needs through charity. An excellent resource is *What Home Visits are All About* by Phil Schlosser of Seattle Voice of the Poor. This document chronicles the surprising chain of events resulting from a home visit.

Listening to the stories of those in need provides a practical “how to” regarding follow-up. In addition, their stories may help us identify the root causes of poverty that could be appropriately addressed by Voice of the Poor.

### 1. Purpose of a follow-up visit:

- Best time is NOT when family is in immediate crisis.
- Deepen relationship through listening and sharing.
- Allow time for concerns, problems and issues to be brought forward.
- Invite participation in identifying and creating solutions

### 2. Arranging a follow-up visit:

- If you and your partner feel this would be useful, try to arrange a follow-up time at the end of the first visit or call later to arrange a follow-up visit.
- When arranging the follow-up visit suggest a time to meet for about half an hour.
- Call ahead as a reminder before actually going on this visit.

### 3. Preparation for follow-up visit:

- Review the case with your partner.
- Take time to focus and say a prayer.
- Allow time for re-introductions when you arrive

### 4. Developing the relationship:

- Ask questions that were not addressed during the first visit – how long have they been living here, where did they live before, why did they move here, etc.
- Are they active in a church? If so, has it been supportive?

### **You are looking for:**

1. Their story. Some common areas of concern to raise during the visit: children and youth; school and education; family pressures; affordable housing; employment; transportation; violence; crime and/or gang activity; drug activity; use of payday loans; health care concerns; and day care.
2. Trends and patterns.

**Remember: Ask what ideas they have to create solutions.**

## **Voice of the Poor Conference Contact Roll Description**

### **Overview:**

The Voice of the Poor Conference Contact promotes the justice concerns of those living in poverty at the local level. The contact serves as a liaison between the Archdiocesan or Diocesan Voice of the Poor, and the individual Conference. Vincentian advocacy must be present in the public, political arena, but it is always non-partisan. To speak with “one voice,” special attention needs to be given to emphasize official positions on issues — from the National VOP, U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops or the archdiocesan/diocesan council) — but *not* an individual member’s special interest.

### Primary responsibilities:

- Receive and promote educational and action alerts (see CapWiz page on the VOP website).
- Consult with Conference President to put VOP concerns on the agenda.
- Report to the archdiocesan/diocesan council VOP the results of Conference action and communicate local concerns.
- Attend a yearly formation session on Voice of the Poor.

## **Voice of the Poor Conference Contact (VOPCC)**

### **Duties**

The Voice of the Poor Conference Contact (VOPCC) promotes the justice concerns of the poor on the local level. The contact serves as a liaison between the Voice of the Poor District Contact and the individual Conference. Vincentian advocacy must be present in the public, political arena but it is always non-partisan.

### Primary responsibilities are:

1. Receive and promote educational and action alerts. Encourage Conference to sign up for

*Hence, those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a preferential love on the part of the Church which, since her origin and in spite of the failings of many of her members, has not ceased to work for their relief, defense, and liberation through numerous works of charity which remain indispensable always and everywhere (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. 2448)*

CAPWIS alerts (<http://www.capwiz.com/svdpusa/mlm/signup/>).

2. Listen for client issues that may have common solutions at their root that we can do something about.

*During Pope John Paul II's first visit to the United States, he commended American Catholics for their generosity in supporting the Church's charitable works that minister to persons in need.*

*"But this is not enough," the pope said. Christians in cooperation with others must "seek the structural reasons which cause poverty . . . Do not recoil before the reforms--even profound ones--of attitudes and structures that are necessary to create over and over again the conditions needed by the disadvantaged if they are to have a fresh chance in the hard struggles of life."  
([http://usccb.org/cchd/pope\\_xcerpts.shtml](http://usccb.org/cchd/pope_xcerpts.shtml))*

3. Consult with Conference President to put VOP concerns on the agenda.
  4. Report to the Diocesan Committee and the District Contact any systemic or root cause issues that the Committee should add to their agenda.
  5. Encourage use of Service in Hope, Module 4 & Voice of the Poor spiritual reflections.
- Due to the time sensitive nature of the legislative process, **the VOPCC must have regular access to email.**
  - There is NO limit to the number of persons in each Conference who receive VOP information by email.
  - Formation of a VOP Committee by each Conference is encouraged.
  - VOP activity by Conference representatives is considered active Vincentian work.

VOP can **never** take a position without approval of the diocesan council. However, individuals are encouraged to take a personal stand on issues that reflect their personal views as well as Catholic teaching of the preferential treatment for the poor.

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### **Characteristics of a Voice of the Poor Vincentian**

1. Willing to share time, talent and love.
  2. Acknowledge that God's plan should supersede personal aspirations and hopes.
  3. Recognize the importance of intelligently speaking out on behalf of the poor.
  4. Desire to seek the truth and to carefully document information to validate conditions of need.
5. Ability to use communications tools (such as email, fax, internet) to facilitate committee work.
  6. Exhibit flexibility and willingness to analyze, discuss and communicate facets of social concerns by working in the spirit of Vincentian friendship. Exhibit openness to others and their opinions.
  7. Understand the duty of the Voice of the Poor Committee in upholding the Rule and mission of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.
  8. Individual who upholds gospel values, with a desire to serve Jesus by the examples of St. Vincent de Paul and Frederic Ozanam

*"It is not just a question of eliminating hunger and reducing poverty. It is not just a question of fighting wretched conditions, though this is an urgent and necessary task. It involves building a human community where everyone can live truly human lives, free from discrimination. . . . free from servitude to others or to natural forces which they cannot yet control satisfactorily. . . . Each person must examine his or her conscience, which sounds a new call in our times"*  
(*Populorum Progressio* (Pope Paul VI, 1967) 47).

## **Voice of the Poor Mentors**

Contact your Regional Voice of the Poor Representatives for assistance in finding help close to you. To find your regional VOP representative go to [www.svdpusa.net](http://www.svdpusa.net) or contact VOP Chairman Jack Murphy at [voiceofthepoor@outlook.com](mailto:voiceofthepoor@outlook.com).

## **Initiating Your First Project**

Early meeting agendas might include development of a Mission Statement/Flier about VOP for distribution to prospective members and interested community groups.

Some basic steps to develop your first project:

- Reach out to SVdP Conferences in your area to ask for volunteers to participate in Voice of the Poor. (See the Conference VOP Job Description that follows.)
- Identify organizations in your community for collaboration. Contact these groups and ask if one of your members can attend their meetings. (Examples: Peace and Justice Parish Committees, other nonprofit service providers and coalitions, governmental agencies providing social services).
- Develop a simple survey of issues for local Conferences to discuss and return to you. Prioritize and select no more than three issues to follow at any given time. In particular, you're looking for issues that engage everyone.
- Identify local leaders and decision makers involved in the high-priority issues, and introduce them to SVdP. (Establish your credentials as someone who works directly with those living in poverty).
- Ask for volunteers to research and report back to committee on the selected issues.

## **Nuts and Bolts:**

### **Practical Issues To Consider**

- Taking a VOP Issue to Your Council
- VOP can *never* take a position without approval of the Diocesan Council.
- Research, summarize and write up your recommendation.

- Ask the council president to put VOP on the agenda.
- Board action on a VOP issue should be communicated to SVdP membership (email, flier or brief newsletter)
- Official SVdP communication to decision makers is done by your Council President (may be phone call, letter, FAX or email), with members asked to follow up with their own messages.
- A crucial job of the Voice of the Poor is to simplify the message to be delivered and give information to members regarding HOW TO CONTACT DECISION-MAKERS, generally by email, FAX or telephone.
- The National Council Office sends national alerts via Capwiz, an external platform that generates broadcast email messages.
- A major role for VOP involves education through the identification and communication of community services or changes in procedures helpful to those we serve. (Examples: changes in food stamp requirements, child care applications, low income healthcare applications, WIC, utility discounts, foreclosure helplines, Earned Income Tax Credit resources, etc.)
- Information workshops are a perfect opportunity to introduce Voice of the Poor. Always have sign-up sheets available.
- Use good email etiquette when communicating with your VOP Committee:
- Confine the use of your emails to information pertinent to issues.
  - Learn how to send messages to your list using “Blind Copy” so that email addresses are protected.
  - Do not overwhelm your membership with information.
  - NEVER share your VOP email address file; it is confidential information.
- Remember that Voice of the Poor is a long-range project. Building membership and having highly involved participants takes time, patience and persistence.

## Example of VOP Conference Survey

Here is a sample survey that was used to gather information to prioritize issues for Voice of the Poor at the Phoenix SVdP.

### Voice of the Poor Conference Survey Phoenix Diocesan Council Voice of the Poor October 2007

Please help Voice of the Poor prioritize advocacy issues for this year. Conference responses will be tallied and used to develop the annual VOP Legislative Agenda. Please discuss, reach a consensus and rank the issues listed below in order of importance. (For example, 1 could be the highest priority and 10 would be the least).

- \_\_\_ Support programs that facilitate transition from prison to the community
- \_\_\_ Increased emergency funding for utilities
- \_\_\_ Support healthcare coverage and program enrollment for eligible low-income children
- \_\_\_ Increased funding for affordable housing
- \_\_\_ Support a fair and just immigration policy
- \_\_\_ Increased funding for shelter and services for the homeless
- \_\_\_ Eliminate the KidCap in AZ (prohibits any child born or conceived while the mother is on welfare from receiving cash benefits)
- \_\_\_ Support increased childcare subsidies for low-income working parents
- \_\_\_ Support alternatives to payday loans and other predatory lending practices
- \_\_\_ Support educational opportunities/job training programs to raise pay level
- \_\_\_ Issue or concern not listed that your Conference believes is important to those coming to SVdP for assistance:

Conference: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact person: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

## Advocacy Areas Identified by National Voice of the Poor

Over the past several years, Voice of the Poor participants have identified seven areas where legislative change could make a difference in the lives of those stuck in a cycle of poverty. Members of the National VOP Committee have drafted position statements approved by the National Council of the Society in these areas.

### VOP Position Statements

- A Just Wage for Employees of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, April 2001
- Affordable Housing for the Poor (February 2002)

- Health Care for the Poor (February 2004)
- Position Statement on Immigration (September 2004)
- Position Statement on Fair Wages (September 2005)
- Position Statement on Restorative Justice (September 2006)
- Position Statement on Predatory Lending (April 2007)
- Position Statement on Homelessness (August 2007)
- Position Statement on Hunger, Sept. 2008
- Position Statement on Education, April 2010
- Position Statement on Human Trafficking, Sept. 2010

## Examples of Voice of the Poor Advocacy

- Legislation to stop payday lending activity in Oregon, sponsored and successfully spearheaded by the Archdiocesan Council of Portland, Ore.
- Low-income children's health care outreach for a program called "Love Your Kids Day," which involved Conferences in targeted zip codes by Diocesan Council of Phoenix, Ariz.
- Letter-writing campaign to promote energy assistance for low-income families, organized by the Diocese of Belleville, Ill.
- Affordable housing in collaboration with Washington State Catholic Conference-Archdiocesan Council of Seattle, Wash.
- "Tent City" in Milwaukee received a commitment by the City of Milwaukee to create a housing trust fund, with assistance from the Diocese of Milwaukee, Wis.
- Reduce recidivism, prison ministry, full-time prison chaplain and shelter for women released from prison, sponsored by the Diocese of San Mateo, Calif.

## What does The Rule Say about Advocacy?

Part VII of the International Rule of the Society, "Relationship with Civil Society, Work for Social Justice," calls Vincentians to address injustice as part of their mission of service to the poor. Excerpts from Part VII (April, 2005);

7.1 The Society gives immediate help but also seeks mid-term and long-term solutions.

*...In all its charitable actions there should be a search for justice; in its struggle for justice, the Society must keep in mind the demands of charity.*

7.4 The practical Vincentian approach to social justice

*The distinctive approach of Vincentians to issues of social justice is to see them from the perspective of those we visit who suffer from injustice.*

7.5 A voice for the voiceless

*The Society helps the poor and disadvantaged speak for themselves. When they cannot, the Society must speak on behalf of those who are ignored.*

## 7.6 Facing the structures of sin

*Where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structure 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.*

## 7.8 Political independence of the Society

*The Society does not identify with any political party and always adopts a nonviolent approach....*

## **Who are Official Spokespersons for the Society?**

**National Issues:** The Society's National President is the spokesperson for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

**State and local issues:** The Arch/Diocesan Council President with the approval of the local diocesan council and based on recommendations by Voice of the Poor.

NOTE: The National President or the (Arch) Diocesan Council President may, depending on the circumstances and the issue, choose to designate someone to fulfill the role of spokesperson.

## **Difficult Questions, Catholic Answers**

**Q:** *Why should I get involved in advocacy, such as VOP activities? I only want to do home visits in my Conference.*

**A:** **Advocacy has been a cornerstone of the Society since it was founding. Blessed Frederic Ozanam himself remarked on its importance to the success of our mission. Plus, on a broader scale, Catholic social teaching calls us to be a voice for those who have little or no representation.**

**Q:** I cannot get involved in Voice of the Poor because I am a [Republican] [Democrat] [Independent].

**A:** **You don't have to give up your political tenets when you become a member of Voice of the Poor. We are about finding common ground for solutions, including political solutions, to those programs or institutions that create or keep people living in poverty. Also, realize that we advocate for issues, not candidates.**

**Q:** *Isn't it illegal for me as a Vincentian to advocate for candidates for public office? Couldn't we lose our non-profit status with the IRS?*

**A:** **The law provides that charitable organizations can engage in lobbying. In fact, the general experience for many organizations is that they have increased their impact by**

**carefully undertaking lobbying activities. We are not permitted by law to engage in electioneering — in other words, getting involved in supporting or opposing a particular political candidate. Get-out-the-vote and voter education campaigns, including education about a specific issue, are not, by law, considered electioneering. Lobbying policymakers is just one aspect of political or social involvement. Another is advocacy, which means simply arguing in favor of a particular cause or action. Not-for-profit organizations by their very existence are advocates for something specific, such as the arts, the environment, education, justice, transportation, poverty, and so forth. When you read our mission, it is clear that we have a responsibility to advocate for those we serve and to alleviate the root causes of poverty. We do this most effectively and in an organized way through our Voice of the Poor committees at the national and local levels.**

*Q: What if I disagree with the Society's position? For example, I think all illegal immigrants should be locked up, sent back, etc. Why should we advocate for them? They broke the law!*

A: The Society, specifically VOP, advocates for a comprehensive immigration policy, which includes enforcement of our borders and a practical solution to the 12 million-plus immigrants who are here. When we say practical, for example, it's unreasonable— not to mention inhumane — to round up, or even try to round up, more than 12 million people. Our justice system wouldn't have room for them, the country doesn't have the money or manpower to process that many people, and the country would be at an uproar at creating more chaos than that approach would solve.

*Q: How can I get involved and committed to Voice of the Poor?*

**A: Start small and grow with persistence. Here are some practical steps:**

- (1) Use home visits. What you learn from those visits will form the basis of your arguments. Many people hold negative views about those living in poverty simply because they lack first-hand knowledge and experience of who they are and how they struggle.**
- (2) Use the resources available on the VOP web site, as well as other Society communications that lay out our positions.**
- (3) Seek out speaking engagements, especially those venues where you can meet decision makers and legislators.**
- (4) Use SVdP communications, create your own communications, etc.**
- (5) Partner with other Catholic groups, especially on local issues of importance to your community and your state.**