

**National Council of the United States
Society of St. Vincent de Paul
Voice of the Poor
State/Diocesan Advocates Guide**

August 2019

FOUNDATIONS FOR ADVOCACY

Policy advocacy offers Vincentians the opportunity to use the deep knowledge of and experience gained from home visits to inform policy debates.

Advocacy is a central component of the Rule:

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.

7.5 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....

Additionally, the current Strategic Plan (2018-21) calls Vincentians to:

3. Advocate for and work towards a more just world

G1: Inspire membership to embrace Catholic Social Teaching

G2: Establish SVDP as a thought leader on poverty and justice

G3: Be a Voice for the Poor at national, state and local levels

A) Engage Getting Ahead grads & other people with lived experience in advocacy

This guide will help Vincentian state and diocesan Voice of the Poor leaders organize state public policy advocacy campaigns, using the VoterVoice email software. The policy governs the use, administration, management, and process for VoterVoice advocacy consistent with established Voice of the Poor guidelines, as well as the Vincentian Rule and Manual.

This policy applies to all uses of VoterVoice by appointed Voice of the Poor state leaders, as well as National Voice of the Poor Committee members or National Council staff that may act on their behalf.

Each Council President is encouraged to appoint a diocesan VOP leader (see Diocesan/State Role description in Supporting Materials). In situations where there is more than one active Council in a state, the Presidents may agree to designate one person to chair the committee of Diocesan Leaders.

ENGAGING NEIGHBORS IN ADVOCACY

As noted above, the Strategic Plan calls for engaging people with lived experience in advocacy. This may be new for many. One simple step a conference can take toward this goal is to distribute VoterVoice sign up cards on a home visit (see Supporting Materials). This encourages those we serve to sign up to receive the alerts issued and respond, if they would like.

POLICY ISSUES FOR ADVOCACY

Like any other Vincentian endeavor, advocacy should enhance the friendship and spirituality of our members. That is best done when our issues directly relate to those that we see impacting the neighbors we serve. Specific positions taken should be supported by stories from home visits, special works, and other Vincentian activities.

The Society's close and special relationship to friends in need is its strength and most compelling reason for supporting specific policies.

In all cases, the State Leader should ensure that the proposed position is consistent with:

- Catholic Social Teaching
- The Rule and Manual of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul
svdpusa.org/members/Documents/Governance-in-A-Box
- Adopted Positions of the National Council
svdpusa.org/members/Programs-Tools/Programs/Voice-of-the-Poor/Position-Papers

In doing this, the State Leader can always seek the guidance and insight of the National Voice of the Poor Committee co-chairs, the National CEO or Director of Poverty Programs, the Region Spiritual Advisor, or other official.

Relationships with bishops and dioceses require particular consideration. The Society should strive to take positions consistent with, and work in collaboration with, the state Catholic Conference, while recognizing that the Society is independent. Issues should focus on the needs of the people we serve.

An issue can be deemed appropriate if the advocacy campaign is conducted in conjunction with the state Catholic Conference, or if a state Catholic Conference has a public position on the issue in the form of testimony; position paper; letter to legislators, the governor, or other public official; or published action alert.

If the state Catholic Conference has no position on an issue or takes the opposite position, the Society should take that into consideration, but should ultimately make a decision that reflects Vincentian discernment and independence.

ISSUE APPROVAL

Any Vincentian can suggest to his/her Council President or the VOP State Leader that the state program conduct an advocacy campaign on a particular issue.

Approval Process

1. The State Leader will share the issue and justification with the State Voice of the Poor Committee so that the Committee can make a recommendation to the highest elected officials within the state. If there is no state Committee, the State Leader makes the recommendation.
2. The State Leader will share a summary of the issue, the Committee's recommendation, and the proposed advocacy with all of the following representing areas wholly or partially located in the state:
 - (Arch)Diocesan Council Presidents
 - District Council Presidents
 - Isolated Conference President (if applicable)
 - Executive Directors

Executive Director(s) should be copied as a courtesy and so that they can share insights, however their approval is not necessary for a campaign to move forward.

3. Upon receiving the approval of these Vincentian leaders, the State Leader or someone previously involved in the approval process will complete the appropriate template (see Supporting Materials) and send it to the VoterVoice Authorized Users.

Ideally, the highest-ranking elected Vincentian from every Council and/or Isolated Conference (if applicable) will agree to the alert--unanimity makes our message more compelling and far reaching. In the event that one or more officials declines to support the campaign, the campaign can continue, but language that suggests all Vincentians in the state support it should be avoided.

4. Once the message has been completed in the VoterVoice system, an Authorized User will send a test email to the person who submitted it. The message will not be sent to the desired audience until the Authorized User has received confirmation that the message is approved.

Additional Notes

The State Leader should copy the Regional Vice President and the Regional Voice of the Poor leader on all communications and brief either if/when requested. The insight and guidance of both should be taken into consideration, but the approval of the RVP or the VOP Regional leader is not required to conduct an advocacy campaign.

Whether to conduct an advocacy campaign, the stated position, and the contents of communications, are the prerogative of the State Leader and the highest elected Vincentians in the state. The National President, National Voice of the Poor Committee co-chairs, CEO, and/or the National Director of Poverty Programs (or other designated staff liaison) will only raise a question when the recommended action or position appears to contradict Catholic Social Teaching, a position taken by a diocese or conference of bishops, or a position paper adopted by the National Council.

COMPLETING AN ALERT

The best Action Alerts and Informational Bulletins are brief and compelling, with a clear justification for the position taken, and should include the following components:

- a. Citation or Reference justifying the position (include links whenever possible). Examples include:
 - state Catholic conference or USCCB letters
 - SVdP Position Paper
 - Papal Encyclical
 - Pastoral Letter or Statement of a Bishop or state Catholic conference
- b. Concise summary of the “state of play”
- c. In the case of Action Alerts, a clear call to action--what to do and who to contact

It is critical that the template be filled out completely. The template is a reflection of the VoterVoice system. Incomplete or blank answers will require the administrator to return the completed form to the submitter, delaying the Alert.

Additionally, a completed form should include the properly spelled names and titles of all leaders supporting the alert.

CRITICISM AND RESPONSES

It is the prerogative of the State Leader, in coordination with the Signatories to the Action Alert or Informational Bulletin, to decide to respond to criticism. Vocal critics are rarely mollified, so close consideration should be given to the benefit to be gained by responding. If a response is warranted or desired, it should be courteous and civil.

MEDIA AND PUBLICIZING

Please share all press reports, blogs, or other media generated by the action alert, so that the national Voice of the Poor Committee can include it in promotional materials.

CONTACTS

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VOTERVOICE

We should always encourage people to sign up for VoterVoice and invite them to share the link with their networks. Use the following link to sign people up:

<https://votervoice.net/SVDPUSA/register>

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SUPPORTING MATERIALS (see accompanying files)

- I. Action Alert Template
- II. Informational Bulletin Template
- III. List of Regional Vice Presidents, National VOP Committee, and State Leaders
- IV. State Leader Role Description
- V. Additional Resources and Potential Collaborators
- VI. VoterVoice Sign-up cards
- VII. List of State Catholic Conferences with Contact Information