

St. Vincent de Paul Society Milwaukee Archdiocese

Voice of the Poor Committee

Minutes from the Meeting held on May 23rd, 2020

In Attendance: Randy Bedore, Dave Busch, Richard Fedler, Joan Gulczynski, Anne Haynes, Tom Jozwik, Rose Lue-Hing, Michael Howden, E. Michael McCann, Marge Sebern, Sharron Schmidt, and new member Jim Erven

Call to Order: Dave Busch opened the conference call at 9:59 am, allowed a few minutes for others to connect and opened the meeting at 10:07 am with the Opening Prayer for Society meetings. The chairperson then asked new member Jim Erven to introduce himself. Jim is from Our Lady of Guadalupe Conference in Racine.

Minutes: The minutes from the VOP meeting held on April 18, 2020 were reviewed and two exceptions were noted. Rose Lue-Hing stated that her statement regarding over reporting of Covid-19 cases was not clear. Further, her last name had been misspelled in two places. The statement was revised and the misspelling was corrected. Mike McCann reported that the statement referring to the vote made by State Representative Andre Jacques from Green Bay on the Expungement Bill was incorrect. Jacques had voted against passage of the bill, and not in favor of it as the Minutes had stated. Revised Minutes (Rev 01) will be sent out to all VOP members following this meeting.

Subcommittee Updates:

Energy – Dave Busch reported that the moratorium on utility disconnections normally ends on April 15th. Unofficially, WE Energies is telling customers that call in to set up payment plans, that the moratorium on shutoffs will remain in place through the rest of this summer, taking us into the next heating season. However, [WE Energies](#) customers are still obligated to pay their bills or arrange a payment program with the utility to remain in good standing. Neighbors requesting help from SVDP with their energy bills will not have to face a disconnect notice until next year. And the Energy Assistance program is likely to receive increased funding for the coming heating season.

Health Care - Marge Sebern reported that confirmed cases of COVID-19 have surpassed 14,000 in Wisconsin. Milwaukee Waukesha Racine and Kenosha County's lead the state in the number of confirmed cases. There is a disproportionate number of minorities reporting positive for the virus. Latinos account for 40% of all confirmed cases while only representing 14% of the state's population. Another 21% of confirmed cases are infecting African-Americans. Only 6.7 percent of Wisconsin residents identify as black. The speculation for the disproportionate numbers is that many Latinos have jobs inside the health care system. Marge also reported that the [16th Street Clinics](#) are providing a lot of Covid-19 tests in Milwaukee. Call the clinic before coming in. They are only seeing patients by appointment at this time.

Rose Lue-Hing reported that she had heard a story on the radio featuring Biologist Dr. Judy Mikovits who studied Coronavirus early on, reporting that tests for coronavirus on domesticated cats, dogs, pigs, chickens, ducks and ferrets found that both cats and ferrets are highly susceptible to the virus. Dr. Mikovits warned that pets may be passing the virus to their owners.

That study was originally published in the journal Science and they concluded that Cats can become infected through airborne transmission. Dogs, however, have a very low susceptibility to the virus. The study also stated that it is highly unlikely that a person could become infected from a pet. Human to human transmission is our greatest risk.

Rose also stated that some of the corona virus fatalities attributed to Milwaukee County actually occurred outside the county. Several nearby communities that do not have their own facilities, send their cases to the Milwaukee County Morgue. Those cases would be counted in Milwaukee.

Housing: Rose reported on the workings of the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA). [WHEDA](#) is a public corporation governed by a 12-member board. The board includes six appointees of the governor, four legislators representing both parties and both houses, plus a Board Chairman and an Executive Director.

WHEDA administers numerous loan programs and other programs and projects that provide housing and related assistance to Wisconsin residents of low and moderate income. WHEDA also finance his loan guarantees and administers other programs to support business in agricultural development in the state WHEDA finance is designed for rations by issuing bonds to support its operations These bonds do not create a debt for the state, but WHEDA bonds currently carry about \$1.76 billion of debt for the corporation.

Dave Busch reported that Wisconsin announced a new program for people that need help paying rent or obtaining a security deposit to secure housing. With funds provided through the federal Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security act (CARES), Governor Evers announced a new Wisconsin Rental Assistance Program ([WRAP](#)).

WRAP funds are being administered by the Social Development Commission ([SDC](#)) in Milwaukee, Ozaukee and Washington counties.

Here are the General Eligibility Guidelines

- Meet all the non-financial and financial eligibility criteria
- Must be an adult Wisconsin resident
- Household income at or below 80% County Median Income (CMI) in the month prior
- Persons at or below just 60% CMI will receive priority
- Only one recipient per qualified household
- Must document a loss of employment or a reduction in income due to COVID 19

Assistance for public rental help programs (Public Housing Program, Section 8 HCV and PBV programs, etc.) and Mortgage payments are not eligible for help under WRAP.

Food/hunger: Tom Jozwik reported Money has been allocated by the CARES act for helping food distribution networks.

Food Share Wisconsin has come out with emergency funds for families with a child or children who usually get free or reduced-price school meals through the National School Lunch Program. Qualified families can get temporary food benefits in place of the school meals. These benefits are called Pandemic EBT or P-EBT.

If you are already receiving Food Share benefits and have children enrolled in a school meal program, another agency interview is not needed in order to receive the new P-EBT card.

Wisconsin has more information on this program here:

<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/forwardhealth-foodshare.htm>

Dick Fedler reported that the North and South Side meal sites have been providing meals throughout the Corona virus emergency. The North Side location has a food truck on site. All food is prepared in a certified kitchen and handed out at the truck following social distancing guidelines. The South Side Meal site is open but distributing meals outside of the door, for take away only. Only paid staff are allowed on either site at this time, and no volunteers. It is expected that both

sites will be needing volunteers again by July. Distribution is likely to remain “carry out only” for some time to come.

Rob Shelledy has sent out a link to the Milwaukee Archdiocese Coronavirus Emergency Fund. This fund was established to support ministries serving those in need who have been negatively affected by the pandemic. Your ministry can apply for funds here:

<https://archmil.regfox.com/coronavirus-emergency-fund-application-form>

Immigration: Sharron Schmidt reported that since the Trump administration announced on September 5, 2017, that it was ending Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), [several lawsuits](#) were filed against the administration for terminating DACA unlawfully. As a result, three nationwide injunctions issued by U.S. district courts — in California, New York, and the District of Columbia — have allowed people who have previously had DACA to renew their deferred action. On June 28, 2019, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to review these legal challenges. The Supreme Court heard oral argument on the cases on November 12, 2019. **A decision is expected no later than June 2020.** The Supreme Court did not “stay” any of the lower court orders when it agreed to review these challenges, which means that DACA recipients who currently have or previously had DACA can continue to submit applications to renew their DACA status. This ruling will affect the status of nearly 800,000 immigrants who have lived in the US most of their lives. Marge Sebern added that on June 6th, the league of Women Voters of Milwaukee County will be holding a public forum on topic of DACA. You can view it here:

<https://www.facebook.com/lwvmilwaukee/videos/1641406056013977/>

Sharron received a letter from Senator Tammy Baldwin’s office reporting that very little is being done to protect immigrants being held in US detention centers. Guards in the detention centers have not yet been supplied with masks or gloves. Congress has written a letter directly to the President, calling him to take action on this matter. And they have written to the office of the Inspector General asking for an investigation into the level of protection being afforded to detainees from covid-19.

Additionally, Congress has written a letter to the leadership of both Houses urging them to ensure that they provide any further vital programs and economic lifelines provided for Corona virus relief be made accessible to ALL communities in the US regardless of their immigration status.

Human trafficking - Mary Steger was unable to attend this meeting so discussion on this topic was tabled until the next meeting.

Labor/Minimum Wage – Dave Busch reported that more than 2 million weekly unemployment claims have been filed in Wisconsin since March 15, but only about 1.4 million of those claims have been paid out, according to the [Department of Workforce Development](#). That leaves more than 675,000 claims unpaid. The backlog is mostly due to the unprecedented increase in the number of claims. The Governor has responded by moving some otherwise furloughed state employees into the department of Workforce Development and they are attempting to hire and train an additional 500 people as mixed temporary and permanent employees, to qualify and process the backlog of unemployment claims.

The federal CARES Act is providing an additional \$600 per week of unemployment benefits for workers displaced by the pandemic. Those funds are only available for payment through the week ending July 25th.

Criminal Justice: Mike McCann stated that there is no new or pending legislation to report on in Wisconsin, as the Legislature has already recessed for the summer.

Mike also mentioned that the SVDP Thrift Store in Greenfield is open once again.

Dick Fedler added that the Lincoln Avenue Store is also open, but not accepting donations at this time. Donations of soft goods can only be made during limited hours at the Greenfield SVDP Store, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from noon to 4 pm. You must call ahead to make donations of furniture.

Dave Busch noted that because people are spending so much time at home, they are cleaning out their houses. Trucks and cars with trailers have been lining up every day outside city of Milwaukee dump sites to drop off unwanted home goods.

Waukesha Update: David Anderson was unable to attend this meeting so discussion on this topic was tabled until the next meeting.

Old Business:

Backing Gun Legislation – Dave Busch reported that he was able to attend the Board Meeting of the Executive Council for the Milwaukee Archdiocese Society of St. Vincent de Paul. His appearance in front of the Board was a follow up to our earlier request to support new gun legislation that was passed by Congress and sent to the US Senate where it has been left stuck in Committee. Our original request was turned down by our Board based on the fact that this is a national issue and only the National VOP is allowed to speak on national issues. Busch explained that we found this to be a reasonable position, but the Milwaukee VOP could not understand why the National was not already backing HR 8 - the Bipartisan Background Checks Act of 2019, and HR 1112 – the Enhanced Background Checks Act of 2019. If enacted into law the bills will close the loopholes in background checks for gun purchases and make it more difficult to purchase a firearm for a person with a history of mental illness or persons having extreme orders of protection or restraining orders against them. So, the Milwaukee VOP wrote an appeal to the National VOP asking them to back the two bills, and we supplied empirical evidence supporting our position that gun violence is a problem directly linked to the poor.

Busch reported that our VOP Committee had received a reply from Jack Murphy, the Society's National Chair for Systemic Change & Advocacy. In his reply Murphy stated that the National does not have a position paper on gun violence because "we have not made a direct connection to how the problem impacts those in need", despite that fact that we put the direct evidence they need, in our request for their support.

Further in his response, Murphy outlined five points that we could take to keep this issue in the spotlight. Point three directed us to "Get the feeling of the Council Board. If they don't support advocacy on this issue, you shouldn't move forward". Busch explained to our Council Board that we are trapped in an unending circle of getting one Board or the other to support us in moving forward with some meaningful changes in gun laws. After directly linking gun violence to neighborhoods with high rates of poverty we feel that it would be a betrayal of our mission statement to not press the issue of improving gun safety laws. We need our Board to vote to support the Milwaukee Archdiocese VOP Committee with these efforts. The Board asked for a few explanations about what they were actually endorsing before they voted. The Board voted five to two to give their support to our efforts! Busch thanked the Board for their support and told them that our next move will be to answer the Jack Murphy letter, point by point and ask the National VOP again to put some support behind affecting gun safety in the United States.

New Business:

A VOP page on the SVDP MKE web site – Dave Busch stated that he had a preliminary conversation with the Central Office to ask about getting a Voice Of the Poor web page established on the [SVDP-Milwaukee web site](#). VOP members agreed that this was a good way to spread the information about our work to a larger audience. The only catch is that the VOP would need to supply content on an ongoing basis to update the page. Posting the Minutes of our meetings, providing links to the VOP Voter Voice site as new Action Alerts are issued, and posting content from the USCCB statements were all listed as good topics for our local VOP page. Busch asked VOP members to consider taking on the role of content manager.

Catholic Church and Politics – Michael Howden reported on an opinion piece in the [National Catholic Reporter](#) regarding phone meetings between Cardinal Dolan and other US bishops, with Donald Trump. Trump is trying to court the Catholic vote in this year's election. Cardinal Dolan was quoted in the article as saying "Trump is a great gentleman who Catholics need more than ever". Many people felt that this read like an endorsement of Trump and are wondering what happened to the church position on the clergy remaining neutral on politics. (Also, many people, like me, wondered who Dolan was referring to when he mentioned "Trump is a great gentleman") There was much speculation that Cardinal Dolan was courting favor from Trump for a share of the 30 billion dollars of CARES Covid recovery money, should it be shared with private churches. Mike Howden compared this to "thirty pieces of silver" for Jesus betrayal and began his report as an apology email addressed to Jesus, on behalf of the leaders of the Catholic church in America. Much great discussion followed. Several people mentioned the USCCB articles that Rob Shelledy had sent out to Vincentians on "Forming your Conscience" and voting your conscience, found here: http://www.usccb.org/cs_upload/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/202455_3.pdf Randy Bedore reminded us that as Catholics we are not single-issue voters and that the clergy do not tell Catholics how to vote; the responsibility to make political choices rests with each person and his or her own conscience.

Mike also wondered aloud "how do we get our church leaders to speak out on social justice?" Anne Haynes offered, that the best way to get Archbishop ListECKI to speak on social justice issues is to send him specific requests in a timely fashion. Suggest to the archbishop that the church take an action or a position on an issue, as soon as it comes to the forefront. Anne cited the recent incident when President Trump announced that he was coming to Milwaukee for a Catholics For Trump Rally. Archbishop ListECKI immediately issued a statement detaching any involvement by the Catholic Church in this campaign rally. The Archbishop stated that "the Catholic Church and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee are not endorsing the rally and are in no way affiliated to or sponsoring this event or campaign locally, statewide, or nationally". The Chairperson had to cut this discussion short, in the interest of time.

Next Meeting: Due to the late date of our May meeting, the next VOP meeting is scheduled for June 20th at 10 am.

Adjournment: The meeting was formally adjourned at 12:03 pm with the chairperson asking members to pray together, the Pope's intercession to Mary for her help during the pandemic.

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