

## Voice of the Poor Committee

### Minutes from the Meeting held on June 20, 2020

**In Attendance:** Randy Bedore, Dave Busch, Jim Erven, Richard Fedler, Tom Jozwik, Rose Lue-Hing, Michael Howden, E. Michael McCann, Marge Sebern, Mary Steger, John Weber

**Call to Order:** Dave Busch opened the conference call at 9:59 am, allowed for others to connect and opened the meeting at 10:05 am with the Opening Prayer for Society meetings.

**Minutes:** The minutes from the VOP meeting held on May 23, 2020 were reviewed and Marge Sebern noted that the information on Covid-19 study on cats and dogs did not come from her. That information should be attributed to Rose Lue-Hing who was reporting on a story she had heard on the radio. Revised Minutes (Rev 01) were sent out to all VOP members following this meeting.

#### Subcommittee Updates:

**Energy** – Dave Busch reported that with the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling that struck down the orders of Gov. Tony Evers's administration to stay-at-home, the moratorium on utility disconnections has also ended. Disconnect notices are being sent out with utility bills at the end of July. Last month WE Energies indicated to some customers that the moratorium might continue through the fall.

In mid-June, WE Energies refiled a rate hike case with the Wisconsin Public Service Commission asking to raise rates this year to pay for the rising cost of nuclear energy.

We energies says it needs to collect an additional \$26.5 million next year, an increase of about 3.4%. For residential customers that would translate to about \$.73 more per month for an increase of about 0.7%. WE Energies sister utility Wisconsin Public Service Corp. has requested a 0.13% increase which would add about eight cents to their customers average monthly residential bill. WE Energies says a rate increase is needed to cover the cost of electricity purchased from the Point Beach nuclear power plant, which according to filings with the Securities Exchange Commission will be \$55.82 per megawatt hour next year. By 2030 the price for nuclear power is expected to be more than twice what it was in 2019. WE Energies is the former owner of the Point Beach plant, Wisconsin's largest operational reactor. They sold the plant to NextEra Energy in 2007 for \$924 million.

The Citizens Utility Board ([CUB](#)) has not yet issued a statement of their position on this rate hike.

**Health Care** - Marge Sebern reported that as bars and restaurants in Wisconsin continue to re-open, the number of coronavirus cases continues to grow. State wide, we have seen an increase of about 60% over the last month, with Milwaukee County having increased by 43%, Ozaukee County increased 66%, and Waukesha County jumped by 55%, with Blacks and Latinos still being disproportionately affected. You can find the latest figures here:

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

Marge also report reported that close-up, person-to-person interaction for extended periods of 15 minutes or more is considered a high-risk factor for Covid-19 transmission.

There have been several studies showing that wearing a face mask or shield will definitely slow or even decrease the spread of viruses.

The CDC recommends facial masks, hand washing, maintaining 6 ft between people, and staying home when sick, as your best defense against the spread of the virus.

Rose Lue-Hing mentioned that she had heard a story that reported the number of coronavirus cases in the US might be overstated, due to incentives for higher profits. The government pays out more money to institutions for the care and treatment of coronavirus cases than it does for the flu or respiratory cases. Dave Busch thought that it would seem unlikely that large hospitals or institutions would misrepresent their numbers to the government because fraudulent reporting can carry very high penalties. A hospital or medical institution would stand to lose more funding in the long run, if found to be guilty of misrepresenting their reimbursement cases, than it could gain in the short run, by over reporting covid-19 cases.

**Housing:** Rose reported that because the libraries are closed, she does not have access to a computer at this time so she was not able to prepare a report this month.

Dave Busch mentioned that in the first two weeks of June, eviction filings jumped 42% statewide over 2019 levels, and slightly more in Milwaukee County, a review of online court records shows. The increase follows the May 27 expiration of Gov. Tony Evers' two-month ban on evictions. Evers imposed the ban in March because of the devastating economic impact and job losses resulting from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Community Advocates, a nonprofit that works on housing for low-income individuals, has brought in "six new staff to be able to meet the demand". Community Advocates has been getting about 200 calls a day since the moratorium ended, a 10-fold increase over its pre-moratorium average. The agency has posted a link to apply for rent assistance on its website at:

<https://communityadvocates.net/what-we-do/rent-assistance.html>

**Food/hunger:** Last month, Tom Jozwik reported that 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. This month, the Trump administration reversed its policy on this and Tom now reports that a personal interview must be completed to receive P-EBT benefits.

Due to school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, families with a child or children who usually get free or reduced-price school meals through the National School Lunch Program, can get temporary food benefits in place of the school meals. These benefits are called Pandemic EBT or P-EBT. Food Share Wisconsin participates in this federal program.

Wisconsin has more information on this program here:

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

Tom also reported that now more people will be able to receive TEFAP benefits in Wisconsin because the threshold for qualifying was lowered to include anyone within 300% of the federal poverty level. [The Emergency Food Assistance Program](#) (TEFAP) is a federal program that helps supplement the diets of low-income Americans by providing them with emergency food assistance at no cost. USDA provides 100% American-grown USDA foods directly to food pantries and also sends administrative funds to states to operate TEFAP.

John Weber reported that the food pantry at Mother of Perpetual Help Parish has been receiving much more produce from local restaurants and farmers because many restaurants have not yet reopened and those that have reopened have been seeing fewer visitors. Local restaurants, and some farmers markets where attendance has also been reduced, have been sharing their surplus with the local food pantries.

Mary Steger reported that her food pantry was asked if they could share food with Notre Dame School Of Milwaukee which is located in a largely Hispanic district in on Milwaukee's southside.

Notre Dame School has an increased need at their food pantry due to school being cancelled and school meals no longer being served. Mary is looking for help to write announcements in both English and Spanish.

**Immigration:** Just two days before this VOP meeting, on June 18<sup>th</sup>, the U.S. Supreme Court blocked the Trump administration's plan to dismantle an Obama-era program that has protected nearly 800,000 so-called DREAMers from deportation. The vote was 5-4 to uphold the DACA Act, with Chief Justice John Roberts writing the [opinion](#).

Roberts' opinion for the court was a narrow but powerful rejection of the way the Trump administration went about trying to abolish the program known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA. Roberts made clear that an administration *can* rescind a program like DACA, and indeed immigration experts don't disagree with that bottom line. The problem for the Trump administration was that it never wanted to take responsibility for abolishing DACA and instead sought to blame the Obama administration for what it called an "illegal and unconstitutional" program. The full implications of the ruling are not yet understood, and the opinion of the court is based on a technicality. For now, those people living in the US under the DACA Act do not have to fear deportation from the only country most of them have ever known, but unfortunately, they also have no pathway yet to citizenship.

Sharron Schmidt is spending her time investigating the implications of this ruling and was not able to attend this month's meeting. She will have a full report for us in the near future.

**Human trafficking** - Mary Steger reported that there are no new updates on human trafficking at this time. Mary also told us that she is putting together a letter to the heads of four major employers in the Sheboygan County area, regarding the mandate from the State of Wisconsin to instruct truck drivers on the signs of human trafficking.

**Labor/Minimum Wage** – Dave Busch reported this week 1.5 million more workers filed for unemployment in the US. This marks the 13<sup>th</sup> straight week with a minimum of 1 million unemployment claims, with over 45 ½ million people now unemployed in the US, with the country's three most populous states at a record high number of new coronavirus cases. Wisconsin's jobless rate has skyrocketed to nearly 27% due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the states shuttering thousands of businesses to combat the spread of the disease, according to a new estimate from the State Department of Workforce Development. This projection, which is not the same as the official state unemployment rate, mirrors the explosive growth in unemployment claims across the country. Just one year ago, in April 2019, Wisconsin had recorded its lowest unemployment rate ever, at 2.8%.

The State has been making some improvements at catching up on responding to the overwhelming number of Unemployment Insurance claims made since February.

"Almost 90% of claims filed between March 15 and May 2 have resolved, meaning that they have either been paid or denied," DWD Secretary Caleb Frostman said in the June press release reporting on Wisconsin unemployment figures. And the number of new weekly claims is beginning to drop, after hitting its peak during the week ending April 4<sup>th</sup>.

**Criminal Justice:** E. Michael McCann reported on a bill in the US Congress to advance a broad reform of policing issues. H.R.7120 - [George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020](#) was introduced in the House on June 8<sup>th</sup> by Representative Karen Bass (D-CA) and was co-sponsored by 230 Democrat Representatives.

This bill addresses a wide range of policies and issues regarding policing practices and law enforcement accountability. It includes measures to increase accountability for law enforcement

misconduct, to enhance transparency and data collection, and to eliminate discriminatory policing practices.

The bill facilitates federal enforcement of constitutional violations (e.g., excessive use of force) by state and local law enforcement. Among other things, it does the following:

- lowers the criminal intent standard—from willful to knowing or reckless—to convict a law enforcement officer for misconduct in a federal prosecution,
- limits qualified immunity as a defense to liability in a private civil action against a law enforcement officer or state correctional officer, and
- authorizes the Department of Justice to issue subpoenas in investigations of police departments for a pattern or practice of discrimination.
- bans the use of chokeholds and “no knock” warrants in all states.

The bill also creates a national registry—the National Police Misconduct Registry—to compile data on complaints and records of police misconduct, making it more difficult for bad police officers to move from job to job.

It establishes a framework to prohibit racial profiling at the federal, state, and local levels.

The bill establishes new requirements for law enforcement officers and agencies, to report data on use-of-force incidents, to obtain training on implicit bias and racial profiling, and to compel police officers to wear body cameras.

The Senate version of this Police Reforms bill, S.3985, the [Justice Act](#), is a slightly watered down version of the House bill but it would additionally include de-escalation training for all police officers.

Mike stated that he had contacted both Jack Murphy and SVDP Regional VP Tom Malloy about support for these reforms. Both responded that there is no national policy yet regarding these reform bills.

In Wisconsin, the Assembly has introduced [AB 1012](#), a bill to amend law enforcement agency policies on the use of force. This bill requires the Law Enforcement Standards Board (LESB) to develop a model “use of force” policy for law enforcement agencies. The model policy must also address interactions with individuals with mental disorders, alcohol or drug problems, dementia disorders, and developmental disabilities; limit the use of force against vulnerable populations; and include other best practices that LESB identifies.

Mike suggested that we put together an effort to back these bills. McCann then made a motion that we put together a letter to the National VOP including Jack Murphy and Tom Malloy, and ask the VOP to move expeditiously to support the movement to reform policing policy across the US. Dick Fedler seconded the motion. A voice vote was taken and the members unanimously voted yes to this motion. Mike McCann agreed to start working on the letter to the National VOP.

Marge Sebern then asked if the National VOP is on record in opposition to the death penalty. Mike noted that the Pope and the USCCB are both on record against the death penalty, but could not recall if the VOP had taken a stand on this issue. Marge then reported that the Trump Administration has decided to resume Federal executions. Four federal prisoners are scheduled for execution this month. The last federal execution took place over 17 years ago. Attorney General William Barr restarted the execution process about a year ago, but litigation over the new lethal injection protocol took months to move through the courts. The Supreme Court has declined to hear a challenge to the federal death penalty method, allowing the executions of four men scheduled in the coming weeks to go forward.

**Waukesha Update:** David Anderson reported that many Waukesha conferences have been meeting by phone over the last couple of months. At Saint Leonard's Conference the leaders have been meeting in a large backyard of one of their members so that they can adequately social distance while meeting in person. About half of the 26 conferences in Waukesha County are still actively filling requests for help, but roughly half of the Conferences have suspended meetings and home visits entirely. Most of the home visits still being conducted are being done over the phone.

Waukesha County meal sites are preparing meals in a commercial kitchen in advance, and distributing take-out containers to the hungry, at the door. Dick Fedler mentioned that the Milwaukee meal sites are also using that same method. And for a short time, the North Side meal site was distributing meals out of a food truck parked on the site.

David also reported that at the end of July WE Energies will be sending out disconnect notices in Waukesha County.

## **Old Business:**

**Backing Gun Legislation** – Dave Busch reported last month that the SVDP Archdiocese Board of Directors backed our move to support new gun safety legislation pending in the US Senate. At this meeting, Busch reported that he has not yet been able to write the response to the letter we received from Jack Murphy, the Society's National Chair for Systemic Change & Advocacy. Murphy had outlined five points that we could take to keep this issue in the spotlight. Busch told our Board that our next move will be to answer the Jack Murphy letter, point by point and ask the National VOP to put their support behind the background checks laws that will be the first step towards improving gun safety in the United States. Marge Sebern offered to help write this letter.

**A VOP page on the SVDP MKE web site** – Dave Busch stated that the Central Office of the Milwaukee Archdiocese SVDP Society is currently in the process of revamping their website and will look at giving the VOP Committee a page on the site under the Member Resources link at the top of the home page. VOP members agreed that this was a good way to spread the information about our work to a larger audience, through the posting of the Minutes of our meetings, by providing links to the VOP Voter Voice site as new Action Alerts are issued, and through posting content from the USCCB statements on social justice. Previously, Busch asked VOP members to consider taking on the role of content manager for the VOP web page, and Marge Sebern stated that she would be willing to update the content for the VOP Committee web page. Dave Busch will keep us informed as this project progresses.

## **New Business:**

**Black Lives Matter** – A brief discussion ensued on the subject of recent protests and rioting that took place in many large cities across the country, that were touched off when George Floyd was killed in police custody in Minneapolis. There was a lot of interest in the Black Lives Matter movement to "defund the police". Several VOP members stated that this concept was largely misunderstood, that many people were taking this to mean a major reduction of the police force, or a total remake of the way policing is done in the cities. Others noted that the concept of defunding was actually about moving some funds away from police departments and spending that money on social programs that could actually improve the lives of minority people. Mary Steger recommended that we all should give a listen to the National SVDP Society podcasts on racism.

The series titled “Hope in the Face of Racism” can be found on the National SVDP website, here: <https://www.svdpusa.org/members/Programs-Tools/Programs/Voice-of-the-Poor/What-Has-Been-Accomplished> Mary recommended viewing “Session 3: Transforming Our Concern into Action” Time was the enemy on this topic and the Chairperson had to cut this discussion short, in the interest of adjourning on time. The committee agreed to monitor the BLM movement and look for ways that we could support their efforts at reducing racism and improving the lives of people of color.

**Next Meeting:** A summer recess has been agreed to for the month of July. Our next meeting will be on the Second Saturday in August, August 8<sup>th</sup> at 10 am.

**Adjournment:** The meeting was formally adjourned at 12:02 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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