

## Voice of the Poor Committee

### Minutes from the Meeting held on October 9, 2021

**In Attendance:** David Anderson, Randy Bedore, Dave Busch, Armand Carriere, Jim Erven, Tom Jozwik, Marian Lamoureux, Lavinia Vollrath, and John Weber.

**Call to Order:** The Chairperson opened the conference call at 8:59 AM, waited for others to connect and called the meeting to order at 9:08 AM with the Opening Prayer for Society meetings.

**Minutes:** The revised minutes from the VOP meeting held on September 11, 2021 were reviewed. The VOP Minutes 09-11-21 Rev01 included a minor revision to John Weber's report on Housing, which clarified the US Supreme Court's ruling that struck down the CDC's Moratorium on Evictions during the pandemic.

The revised minutes were accepted by the members on a unanimous voice vote.

#### Subcommittee Updates:

**Energy** – Dave Busch reported that the Wisconsin Energy Assistance program has begun. During the benefit season, eligible county residents can apply for a one-time payment to help cover a portion of their energy bills. The amount of the benefit varies depending on a number of factors, including household income and size, as well as their heating bills. Busch mentioned that the Energy Assistance Fund is benefitting from extra pandemic funds this year, coming from the American Recue Plan which was passed early this year.

Milwaukee County has a lot of information on this program on their website at:

<https://county.milwaukee.gov/EN/DHHS/Housing/Energy-Assistance>

Applications for Energy Assistance can be made in Milwaukee County and Waukesha County, through Community Advocates, by calling 414-270-4646.

To apply for Energy Assistance in the city of Milwaukee, contact the Social Development Commission at 414-906-2700.

For more information on applying for Energy Assistance outside of these two counties, call 1-833-900-9372.

During the heating season, from October 15 through April 15, Wisconsin utilities are prohibited from disconnecting services that supply the heat to any residence.

**Criminal Justice:** E. Michael McCann was not able to attend this meeting so discussion on this topic was tabled until our next meeting.

There was some brief discussion regarding a number of Criminal Justice bills that we are tracking, including the Expungement of Records Bill AB69, the bill to prevent juveniles from being prosecuted for prostitution as adults, AB185, and SB165 which would ensure that the work records of troubled law enforcement officers will stay on file at the state level so that officers cannot ignore past troubling behavior on duty by simply switching jobs or agencies.

The discussion centered on our frustration with getting meaningful legislation passed in a timely manner, or not getting it passed at all, due to partisan bickering by our lawmakers. In turn, this led to a discussion on gerrymandered voting districts in Wisconsin. Dave Busch stated that the districts have been so precisely rigged, that the majority party is virtually guaranteed to remain in the majority even when getting less than half of the vote. Analyses of the maps in the lawsuit challenging the district maps showed that Republicans are a lock to win 60 percent of statehouse seats even if they win just 48 percent of the vote. Busch mentioned the Harvard Electoral Integrity Project, which quantifies the health of electoral systems in America and worldwide. The [Harvard study](#) rated Wisconsin's electoral boundaries as a three on a scale of one to 100. This is not only the worst rating in the nation, it's lower than any *nation* graded by the EIP has ever scored on this measure.

Busch stated that we would need to find some direct link to how the rigged voting maps directly affect the poor. Armand Carriere stated that he believes it is easy to see the influence this has had on the poor when you look at the lack of revenue sharing that the State sends to Milwaukee, historically a stronghold for Democrats, and the cutbacks in state resources that support for Milwaukee and Madison schools, the lack of movement on police reform bills, and the like. Jim Erven stated that if we are going to take a public position on this issue, we would be wise to see where the Wisconsin Bishops stand on the legal challenges to the current round of redistricting. Erven made a motion that the VOP should contact the Wisconsin Catholic Conference to get their insight on the thinking of the Wisconsin Bishops on gerrymandering, and further offer to partner with the WCC in taking any action of public position on the issue of gerrymandering. This motion was seconded by Marian Lamoureux and was passed on a unanimous voice vote. VOP Chairperson Dave Busch volunteered to reach out and contact the WCC and ask about the position of the Bishops and offer the WCC our support and/or partnership on this issue.

**Health Care** - Marian Lamoureux told us that Wisconsin reported 2,770 new confirmed COVID-19 cases and 17 confirmed deaths over the last seven days, per state data [updated](#) on October 7th. The seven-day rolling average for daily new cases was 2,651, up 205 from a [week ago](#). The seven-day average for new probable cases was 408. To date, there have been 745,802 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 85,691 probable cases and 8,092 confirmed deaths and 897 probable deaths. The seven-day average for daily new deaths was 13.

Marian also told us that she now has a subscription to the daily Health News Email Updates from [Wisconsin Health News](#). Wisconsin Health News is an independent, nonpartisan, online news service designed to meet the information needs of Wisconsin healthcare professionals, decision makers and consumers. Their mission is to provide in-depth coverage of the stories that matter to Wisconsin's healthcare leaders, especially now that healthcare issues are taking on increasing importance in the state, and around the country.

One item reported by WHN is that the State Department of Health is revamping community COVID testing. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) has announced the relaunch of the Testing Pilot Program, now referred to as the [Community Testing Support Program](#), to support entities across Wisconsin in offering local, convenient COVID-19 testing. This program will provide approved communities with free testing supplies and courier services through contracted vendors, as well as reimbursement for specimen collection.

WHN also reported that, 17 counties in Wisconsin are currently at critically high levels for the number of reported cases of COVID-19, including Milwaukee County, and 55 counties are at very high levels.

Health anxiety is a rising concern in Wisconsin, especially among young people. Wisconsin women, infants and children experienced growing behavioral health and anxiety issues even before the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new [report](#) from the United Health Foundation. Dr. Rhonda Randall, executive vice president and chief medical officer of UnitedHealthcare, said that nationally, anxiety in children ages three to 17 went up 21 percent between 2017-2018 and 2019-2020. The report collected data leading up to and in the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Marian also reported that two of the four priests in the Catholic Community of Waukesha, Father Mathew Whidder and Father Pat Heppe, have been diagnosed positive for COVID-19. Both have been removed from active service and Waukesha parishes are now looking for someone to step in and help with parish duties temporarily.

**Housing:** Rose Lue-Hing was unable to attend this meeting due to previous commitments. John Weber has been providing some information on this topic during Rose's absence. Weber reported that under a new rule from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, tenants in HUD-subsidized public housing cannot be evicted for nonpayment without providing them 30 days' notice and information about available federal emergency rental assistance. The rule is scheduled to be published in the Federal Register on Thursday October 7<sup>th</sup>.

Technically, the rule would go into effect 30 days after publication, but a senior HUD official told The Associated Press that public housing authorities across the country were expected to comply immediately. The official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the rule change was due to significant concern about a looming wave of evictions as cases begin to [work their way through courts](#).

Elements of the new rule are not new. The 30-day notice requirement is part of the original [COVID-19 relief package](#). But the change will be coupled with specific guidance for housing authorities on how to steer tenants toward the billions of dollars in available emergency rental assistance. It's also designed to buy some extra time for those funds to work their way through the system.

Besides public housing residents, the rule change will apply to those living in project-based rental assistance properties — a program whereby private for-profit or nonprofit property owners enter into a contract with HUD to provide affordable housing units. All told, HUD estimates that the change will cover 4.1 million people.

More information on federal rental assistance can be found here:

[https://www.hud.gov/topics/rental\\_assistance](https://www.hud.gov/topics/rental_assistance).

Statewide, pandemic rental assistance is available through the Wisconsin Rental Assistance Program ([WERA](#)). Information on where to apply for help can be found here:

<https://www.wiscap.org/agencies-operating-wera-agencias-que-administran-wera>

Help for [homeowners](#) struggling with mortgage payments attributable to the pandemic, can find information and resources from the Federal Housing Finance Agency, here:

<https://www.fhfa.gov/Homeownersbuyer/MortgageAssistance/Pages/Coronavirus-Assistance-Information.aspx#HelpHomeowners>

**Food/hunger:** Tom Jozwik reported that a recent [Associated Press-NORC](#) Center for Public Affairs Research poll has found that 23 percent of Americans say they've not been able to get enough to eat or the kinds of foods they want.

Black and Hispanic Americans, Americans living beneath the federal poverty level and younger adults are particularly likely to confront food challenges, according to the poll. (On the positive side, senior citizens are not mentioned as a particularly likely constituency here.)

An [Associated Press article](#) about the poll, published on Sept. 26 in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, reads in part: “The poll results paint an overall picture of a country where hundreds of thousands of households found themselves suddenly plunged into food insecurity due to the economic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. They often found themselves navigating the intimidating bureaucracy of government assistance programs and with limited knowledge of local food banks or other charitable options available.”

The poll additionally indicates that about one in eight Americans typically obtain food from convenience stores, which tend to offer less nutritious foods at higher prices than do “proper grocery stores” which not easily found in poorer sections of cities.

3:16 PMom also told us that the traditional free-of-charge hot meals at St. Ben’s parish hall in downtown Milwaukee have resumed. The COVID-19 outbreak had put a temporary stop to the indoor dining in March of 2020.

VOP members Tom Jozwik and John Weber visited the new [Hunger Task Force](#) (HTF) facility on Electric Avenue in West Milwaukee on October 5. Kyle Buehner, HTF’s very knowledgeable community relations manager, conducted a [tour of the facility](#) arranged by John’s friend and fellow Vincentian, Sandra Manchester. Weber reported that the enormous new space, on which work is still being done, has a freezer section large enough to drive a forklift in, and will also have a commercial kitchen allowing HTF to offer cooking classes for patrons and groups running meal programs of their own.

HTF has a new program, “Stockbox - Door Dash,” that will provide income-eligible seniors with a free food box delivered directly to their doors. Literature from the Milwaukee County Department on Aging is placed within HTF stock boxes. HTF has a Senior Services outreach team. We learned that HTF has people visiting food pantries, senior centers and meal programs to assist patrons in obtaining FoodShare benefits; a very positive circumstance in view of our VOP’s concern and efforts since we became aware earlier this year, that a considerable percentage of eligible senior citizens were not availing themselves of their rightful FoodShare benefits.

HFT’s Stockbox program, of which Stockbox Door Dash is an offshoot, already has approximately 10,000 senior enrollees. Seniors can learn more and sign up for this program on line at:

<https://www.hungertaskforce.org/stockbox-doordash/>

Weber also mentioned that Hunger Task Force is once again accepting food donations from people. Donations had been suspended at the start of the pandemic. They also cultivate many of their own vegetables, operating a community farm on the site of the former farm fields on the site of the County Correctional facility in Franklin.

Randy Bedore mentioned that the River-West neighborhood food pantry has partnered with Maglio Food Distributors to supply fresh produce for the pantry for distribution. David Anderson told us that in Muskego, people who show up at their food pantry site are given a paper “menu” that they can fill out with their food requests. The volunteers then fill the orders into plastic bags and bring the food out to the cars in the parking lot. John Weber added that Mother of Perpetual Help parish in West Allis does something similar, but the plastic bags are pre-packed equally, then handed out at the door. Weber also mentioned that Hunger Task Force paid for two large freezers used by the MPH Food Pantry.

Some general discussion took place regarding FoodShare benefits in Wisconsin. Jozwik mentioned that the benefit level has been raised temporarily due to the pandemic.

David Anderson asked about how much nutritional value is actually coming from FoodShare funds since the money can be spent on any food item including fast foods

Marian Lamoureux reminded us of the issue of “[food deserts](#)”, large areas of big cities where nutritional food is hard to come by because large supermarkets will not locate in poorer neighborhoods and most residents do not have reliable transportation to shop outside of the neighborhood.

To which, Randy Bedore detailed the situation they find in the 53206 neighborhood, which he labeled as a “classic” food desert. In that area, you find a convenience store on every other corner, where customers largely purchase junk food. Local residents find it easier to shop at the convenience store, sometimes for the simple want of a can opener. Without owning a can opener, poor residents find it difficult to go to the neighborhood church sponsored food pantry.

**Immigration:** Armand Carriere reported by email that approximately 13,000 Afghan refugees continue to be housed at Ft McCoy. It is estimated that about 25% have some English proficiency.

Approximately 400 will be resettled in Wisconsin.

Refugees resettled thru Lutheran Social Services, a major resettlement agency in Wisconsin, will receive an initial grant of \$1,125 per person or approximately \$4,500 for a family of 4. This grant is intended to provide money for rent and security deposits

In a recent decision, the State of Wisconsin has declared the Afghan immigrants eligible for Food Share, W-2 Benefits, and Badger Care.

[Special Immigrant Visa status](#) has been expanded to include additional Afghan immigrants. This creates an easier path to resettlement.

It is expected that refugees will continue to be housed at Ft McCoy thru the end of the year as the vetting process continues.

Catholic Charities of Milwaukee continues to cooperate with Catholic Charities of La Crosse and Green Bay to collect clothing and life essentials for the refugees. Cash donations are also being accepted. Individual parishes have stepped up to work with Catholic Charities and sponsor donation drives, i.e., Holy Family Parish in Whitefish Bay will donate proceeds from a special 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday Collection to Catholic Charities of Milwaukee for the refugees.

Beth Hohenfeldt from the SVDP Central office in Milwaukee reported via email, that Catholic Charities Milwaukee has collected winter coats and clothing and has shipped the items to Fort McCoy to assist our neighbors in need from Afghanistan. Thanks to all who donated to the SVDP clothing drive for refugees.

Armand also reported that the Biden administration is dropping their challenge to a Federal court decision declaring Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals illegal and instead offering changes in the US policy for the immigrant DREAMers, most of whom arrived as small children and have grown up living most of their life in the U.S. The program does not grant them official legal status nor a pathway to citizenship, but it does allow them to apply for a driver’s license, social security number, and work permit.

The Administration has opened a public comment period, scheduled to end Nov. 29th.

Congressional action will ultimately be required to permanently address this immigration issue but the prospect of this happening soon is remote. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops has long supported action to permanently “fix” [DACA](#), citing the contributions made by DACA recipients (known as “Dreamers”) to American society.

**Human Trafficking** – The Committee is looking for another member that may be interested, passionate, or knowledgeable on the subject of Human Trafficking and willing to cover this topic in future meetings. Discussion was tabled until the next meeting.

**Labor/Minimum Wage** – Dave Busch reported that a bill to raise the Minimum Wage in Wisconsin has finally been introduced in the Wisconsin Assembly. [AB477](#) and its companion bill in the Senate [SB452](#), were read into the record. Both bills support raising the state minimum wage for most employees to \$10.15 per hour on the effective date of the bill, and \$15 per hour one year after the effective date of the bill.

The ramp up to \$15 per hour is more abrupt than previous proposals. Previous proposals called for a more gradual ramp up to \$15 over a longer period of time which would have eased the impact on small businesses.

Busch proposed that because many businesses have been forced to raise wages in order to hire enough qualified workers, the need for an increase in the minimum wage becomes even more important. Less qualified workers and lesser educated workers will become trapped in the poorest paying jobs, making the gap between the poor and middle class even wider.

Both bills will require the Department of Workforce Development to annually revise the minimum wage established under the bill by determining the difference between the Consumer Price Index for the preceding year and the CPI for the year before that, and adjust the minimum wage by that percentage difference. Further, current law prohibits a city, village, town, or county from enacting and administering an ordinance establishing a local minimum wage. This bill would eliminate that prohibition. To date, both bills have been read into the record and fiscal estimates are being prepared so no action can be taken as of yet. So far, neither bill has bipartisan sponsorship, so they are unlikely to advance unless they can find some Republicans willing to sign on. Busch will monitor and report back on any progress.

**Waukesha Update:** David Anderson opened by surveying the VOP members on how many Vincentians are doing in-person home visits. Anderson told us that they are offering the people requesting help the option of a home visit or an over the phone visit. Randy Bedore reported that his conference is doing home visits on the porch, not going into the homes. Busch said the Blessed Sacrament conference is doing the same, with Vincentians all wearing masks. Lovey Vollrath mentioned that in Sheboygan they have been given the use of a room at the public library for doing “home” visits. The library staff was very accommodating to the Vincentians, even allowing them to distribute food from the library meeting room. Anderson said that their conference often allows the Vincentians to decide for themselves whether or not to enter a home.

Anderson briefed us on reopening the temporary shelters in Waukesha for this winter. Sienna House at 1519 Summit Avenue is closed while undergoing remodeling and is expected to reopen by Thanksgiving.

The Hope Center, located at 502 N. East Avenue will open as a daytime warming center starting November First. The Hope Center also offers breakfast. And their overflow shelter is targeted to open in December (date yet to be determined).

The Waukesha Council is planning on working with Dodge County and Beaver Dam District Councils and the chairperson of the SVDP North Central Region Disaster Relief Services to get clothing and household items to the Afghanistan refugees at Fort McCoy. Catholic Charities, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and others are working to bring relief to the refugees before winter hits the area. Monetary donations are also being accepted, but Waukesha Council is waiting for the relief group to present their plan and list their needs before deciding on how to best help the refugee relief efforts. More information on how to help the refugees can be found here:

<https://cclse.org/afghanistan-refugee-assistance/>

Lastly, Anderson reported that in response to the covid-19 crisis, the Department of Administration (DOA) has adjusted the eligibility requirements for residents who are seeking heating and electric assistance through Wisconsin Home Energy Assistance Program ([WHEAP](#)).

Eligibility is now based on the households' previous one month income, rather than the former requirement of the previous three months of income. This move was made to ensure that those who are recently affected by the covid-19 pandemic are able to receive assistance quickly.

**Racine Update:** Jim Erven reported that the Racine Council has signed a lease on property for a new Thrift Store in the city of Racine. The new store will be located at 2118 Rapids Drive in Racine, 53404. The site is undergoing some renovations before they can open for business, but progress towards occupying the space is underway.

All Conferences in the Racine Council are invested in helping with transportation of relief supplies to the Afghan refugees located in Wisconsin. Currently there are three SVDP conferences in the Racine District Council, each made up of members from several parishes.

The Racine group rented a truck and made several trips to transport relief items to Fort McCoy located between Sparta and Tomah, in Monroe County. They were one of the first to respond to the request for clothing and personal hygiene items, including diapers for the many children and newborns housed at the refugee camp. Children make up nearly half of the almost 13,000 Afghan refugees at Fort McCoy.

Erven also told us that he has been watching the reports on how resources are being allocated from the Biden Infrastructure Spending bill, the [Build Back Better](#) Act. This bill will provide funding, establish programs, and otherwise modify provisions relating to a broad array of areas on two different fronts, contingency and social. Items under the contingency (physical) front will include labor, public transit, bridges and roads, the nation's broadband, and mitigation of climate change. Projects on the social side will include education, child care, health care and mental health, and immigration. Jim described the bill as an "omnibus spending bill"; with over 200 different spending initiatives included. Jim correctly stated that regardless of what gets approved when the bill passes, more important to us is how the bill will be disseminated. How the money will be spent will be most important to the poor. How the poor will be able to participate in the benefits this spending will bring, remains to be seen. Jim will continue to monitor the progress of the bill along with the allocation of spending, and report back to our committee on his findings.

The bill is expected to be passed and sent to the President to sign into law by the end of October.

### **Old Business:**

**SVDP Awareness Month** –VOP Chairperson Dave Busch reminded us that October is SVDP Awareness Month. Awareness Month guidelines have been sent electronically to all Conference Presidents and posted online. You can read the booklet here:

<http://svdpmilw.org/uploads/Vincentian%20Awareness%20Month2021Final.pdf>

The Chairperson asked VOP Committee members to urge their conferences to sponsor some St. Vincent de Paul Awareness activities this October.

### **New Business:**

**Wis. Expungement Bill on Voter Voice** – Dave Busch reported that he has been in touch with the SVDP State Coordinator Jim Penczykowski from the Madison Council VOP. Jim agreed with our plan to use Voter Voice to get some support for passage of the expungement bill in Wisconsin. Jim stated that he would talk to the Madison VOP group to get their consensus and also seek the approval of the Madison Council President, and report back to us on his progress.

**Gerrymandering in Wisconsin** – Info on the lawsuits filed over Wisconsin voting district lines was discussed earlier under the Social Justice heading (above).

**Next Meeting:** Our next meeting will be held virtually once again, using your phone or computer, on **November 13, 2021 at 9 am**, the second Saturday in November. Watch your email for the invitation to the November meeting. It could land in your spam or junk mail folder due to the number of recipients it is being sent to. The link to the Zoom Meeting is also found at the bottom of this document.

**Adjournment:** The meeting was formally adjourned at 11:02 am with all members praying together a Closing Prayer For an Increase in Self-Respect and Courtesy.

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## **MILWAUKEE ARCHDIOCESE VOICE OF POOR COMMITTEE**

Armand Carriere	<a href="mailto:ae2425@gmail.com">ae2425@gmail.com</a>
David Anderson	<a href="mailto:ajand1339@gmail.com">ajand1339@gmail.com</a>
David Busch	<a href="mailto:dabusch99@yahoo.com">dabusch99@yahoo.com</a>
E. Michael McCann	<a href="mailto:emichaelmccann@yahoo.com">emichaelmccann@yahoo.com</a>
Jim Erven	<a href="mailto:erven.jm@gmail.com">erven.jm@gmail.com</a>
John Weber	<a href="mailto:jjweber46@sbcglobal.net">jjweber46@sbcglobal.net</a>
Lavinia Vollrath	<a href="mailto:loveyvollrath@gmail.com">loveyvollrath@gmail.com</a>
Marian Lamoureux	<a href="mailto:marianlamoureux@gmail.com">marianlamoureux@gmail.com</a>
Michael Howden	<a href="mailto:mjhowden@att.net">mjhowden@att.net</a>
Randy Bedore	<a href="mailto:ranshorewood@yahoo.com">ranshorewood@yahoo.com</a>
Richard Fedler	<a href="mailto:rfedler@aol.com">rfedler@aol.com</a>
Rob Shelledy	<a href="mailto:shelledyr@archmil.org">shelledyr@archmil.org</a>
Rose Lue-Hing	414-445-9224
Tom Jozwik	<a href="mailto:mjozwik@hotmail.com">mjozwik@hotmail.com</a>

### **Link to our next Virtual Zoom Meeting**

St. Vincent de Paul Society of Milwaukee is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom teleconference meeting for the Archdiocesan Council Voice of the Poor Committee, on the second Saturday of each month, at 9 am.

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84435969715?pwd=WFN2NlhkV1c1SVpqd2l1RG5oVklyUT09>

Meeting ID: 844 3596 9715

Passcode: 1234

**Or DIAL: +1 312 626 6799**