

**St. Vincent de Paul Society**  **Milwaukee Archdiocese**

**Voice Of the Poor Committee**

**Minutes from the Meeting held on January 14, 2023**

**In Attendance:** David Anderson, Randy Bedore, Dave Busch, Armand Carriere, Jim Erven, Dick Fedler, Tom Jozwik, Julie Krahl, and John Weber

**Call to Order:** While we waited for all members to log into the Zoom meeting, there was some general discussion about the mild winter and how it might affect utility bills in light of the recent rate increase. The Chairperson called the meeting to order at 9:09 AM and together we prayed the opening prayer for St. Vincent de Paul Society meetings.

**Minutes:** The minutes from the VOP meeting held on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022 were emailed to committee members for their review before the start of this meeting. The chairperson asked the committee members in attendance if they had any corrections that needed to be made to the minutes. No corrections were offered and the December minutes were accepted as submitted, by general consent.

**Subcommittee Updates:**

**Energy** – Dave Busch opened this month’s updates by stating that the recently approved rate hike granted to WE Energies is now in effect, but most people will not see it on their bill until next month when the January usage is calculated. Busch mentioned that he will be interested in hearing from the committee members on how the new rates have impacted their energy costs. Busch reminded us that WE Energies agreed to consider allowing some type of discount for people in need. But the details on the discount and how to qualify for the “in-need” rate have not yet been revealed. Citizens Utility Board ([CUB](#)) Executive Director Tom Content had stated that: “It’s important that the PSC actually agreed with CUB that more flexibility and more innovative programs are needed for low-income customers, so (the PSC) opened the door to actually allowing We Energies’ low-income customers to get a discount on their rates.” To date there is no information on how to apply for a discount utility rate.

Busch finished his report by reminding us that there is still plenty of funds available for energy assistance. If you are visiting people in need that need help on their utility bills remind them to apply through one of the social service agencies, [Community Advocates](#) or [Milwaukee County Government Assistance](#), to get the fastest response.

**Food/hunger:** Next up, Tom Jozwik reported that the Wisconsin FoodShare benefits pandemic increase - the [FoodShare Emergency Allotments](#) put into effect during the pandemic to insure that people could feed their families - will cease at the end of February. This is in accordance with the 2023 federal Consolidations Appropriations Act signed Dec. 29, 2022.

[Feeding America Eastern Wisconsin](#) anticipates a disproportionate effect on people with disabilities and seniors. A Feeding America official has pointed out that food benefits currently at \$280 a month will go down to \$23 a month. As a consequence, more than \$70 million a month will no longer go to Wisconsin stores. The FoodShare pandemic allowance had given people the opportunity to go to traditional grocery stores for supplies they couldn't otherwise afford. A bigger burden on food pantries throughout the state is expected therefore. You might recall that it was reported last month that food banks appear to be already overtaxed nationally, but anecdotal evidence locally shows that at least some area pantries (i.e., in Waukesha and Ozaukee Counties) seem to be holding their own.

Arman Carriere asked about the qualifications for receiving FoodShare Benefits. Dave Busch reminded everyone that it is based on the combined income and number of people living in the household. If the combined income of the number of people living in one household is within 130 percent of the Federal Poverty Level ([FPL](#)) for that household size, they are qualified to receive FoodShare. David Anderson mentioned that in Waukesha the number of people they are currently feeding is around 35 nightly, before the pandemic emergency funds became available, that number was twice as high. Anderson expects that the number of people they feed is likely to double, and will likely double all over southeastern Wisconsin. Dick Fedler concurred and stated that the same thing happened at the SVDP meal sites. He expects the number of people in line at the SVDP north and south side meal sites will go up quickly starting in March.

Three UN organizations, the UN children's fund [UNICEF](#), the [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) and the [World Food Programme](#), warned recently that a record-high 48 million people could be victims of hunger in central and west Africa in 2023. Currently, it was reported, 35 million people, including about 7 million children, are unable to meet their basic food and nutrition needs. Acute malnutrition among children under age 5 is common in places like Nigeria. The underlying causes include limited access to health care and other basic services, plus conflict and displacement. The UN agencies have urged governments across the region to ramp up support and investments in nutrition and food security. The UN agencies are committed to multiple, integrated programs providing food, nutrition, health, water, hygiene and sanitation, and supporting peacebuilding and peaceful coexistence.

UNICEF boasts that, since 1990, it has helped save the lives of more children than has any other humanitarian organization. Additionally, [Catholic Relief Services](#) aids some 100 countries; donations to CRS can be made online, and donors can specify causes, for example, hunger in Africa.

**Immigration:** Armand Carriere reported that [Title 42](#), an act initiated during the Trump administration to restrict immigration across the border in reaction to the Covid outbreak, has been extended by the Biden administration. The pressure put on the current administration by the crush of people at the border and the crisis unfolding forced the administration to take this position. Incorporated into the extension is a revised policy for asylum seekers from Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Haiti that will allow up to 30,000 migrants per month to enter the country. An on-line application process has been developed to allow asylum seekers to request in-person appointments with US Customs and Border Patrol at eight border cities along the US-Mexico border.

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops ([USCCB](#)) continues to support the Welcome Circle initiative to aid Ukrainian refugees escaping the war in Ukraine. As mentioned last month, it is not certain this idea will get much traction due to the serious financial commitment required. On the local level, St Michael's Ukrainian Catholic Church in Walker's Point is collecting donations to support efforts in the Ukraine through their website [www.stmichaelsukr.org](http://www.stmichaelsukr.org). Or, if people are interested in supporting this effort directly, they can reach out to Joseph Spolowicz, Parish Administrator, at 414-899-5190 or [jspolowicz@hotmail.com](mailto:jspolowicz@hotmail.com)

Legislation designed to create a path to residency in the US for Afghan refugees who worked with American interests in Afghanistan has stalled in Congress. The temporary humanitarian parole status will run out in the summer of 2023, putting the refugees stay in the US in jeopardy. The proposed legislation, S.4787, the [Afghan Adjustment Act](#), if passed, would prioritize the adjustment process for Afghan nationals who supported the US mission in Afghanistan. Concerns about the vetting process have been raised by critics of the proposed legislation. [The bill is being tied up](#) by Sen Grassley of Iowa. Locally, the denial of this bill would adversely affect hundreds of Afghan refugees in greater Milwaukee and the state of Wisconsin. Julie Krahl asked about refugees arriving by plane here in Milwaukee. Dave Busch mentioned that Chicago would be the more likely point of entry for immigrants or refugees arriving in the US, because the only international flights arriving in Milwaukee are from tourist destinations and the majority of those flights are charters. Busch mistakenly stated that the nearest Immigration office is in Chicago and that Milwaukee only has an immigration enforcement office. However, there is an office of US Citizenship and Immigration Application Support Center (ASC) in Milwaukee, located at 310 East Knapp Street.

**Criminal Justice:** E. Michael McCann was unable to attend this meeting. Discussion on this topic was tabled until the next meeting.

**Health Care –** The VOP Committee is looking for another person that may be interested, passionate, or knowledgeable on the subject of affordable health care coverage and is willing to report on this topic in future meetings. Please contact the VOP chairperson if you are interested. In the meantime, we will *replace* the topic of affordable health care and change the emphasis to Mental Health Care. Vincentian Julie Krahl, from the Fond du Lac Council, agreed last month to look into the problems of obtaining [mental health services for those in need](#).

Dave Busch reported that Influenza A has become the predominant virus this week. With respiratory viruses such as COVID-19, influenza, and RSV circulating at high levels nationwide, outpatient influenza-like illness activity and the percentage of positive influenza lab tests in Wisconsin continue to decline.

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services ([DHS](#)) is urging everyone to get all recommended vaccines, including the [updated COVID-19 booster](#) and the [flu vaccine](#), to help prevent and slow the spread of respiratory illnesses.

As of January 4, '23, there were 1,049 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 were added to the system for a 7-day average of 787 cases per day, about one third the level of one year ago. John Weber noted that hospitals in the Milwaukee area still require visitors to wear a mask.

**Housing:** John Weber opened by mentioning that the "[From The Heart](#)" Newsletter sent out by the Milwaukee SVDP Council is full of good information every month. If you would like to subscribe you can send an email request to: [Council@svdpmilw.org](mailto:Council@svdpmilw.org)

First, Weber reported that two Milwaukee nonprofit groups that have led efforts to create affordable housing for people with lower incomes, are planning to develop homes on 90 vacant central city lots starting in 2023.

Milwaukee [Habitat for Humanity Inc.](#) is partnering with the [Community Development Alliance](#) on the housing initiative, which will be in an area bordered mainly by West Vliet Street, West North Avenue, North 13th Street and North 27th Street, according to a city report. There also are two south side lots.

The project won an endorsement from the Milwaukee Redevelopment Authority Board, which approved selling authority-owned lots for \$1 apiece. That sale still needs Common Council approval.

The goal is to build each house for \$200,000, and sell it for \$110,000, with \$10,000 in down payment assistance from the alliance, the homeowner would have a \$100,000 mortgage, he said. Construction of the owner-occupied houses could be funded in part with federal grants provided through the American Rescue Plan Act, as well as state and federal affordable housing tax credits and federal [New Market Tax Credits](#), according to a city report.

The authority board also approved a proposal to allow the Community Development Alliance to borrow \$6million from investors through the sale of tax-exempt Redevelopment Authority bonds. The alliance could use proceeds from the bond sale to help finance the construction of up to 120 homes on vacant city-owned lots, including the 90 lots already being sold.

A [Harbor District housing development](#), featuring affordable apartments, is now planned for nearly 600 units – around 80% more than previously proposed.

Filer & Stowell Lofts is planned for a site at 123 and 147 E. Becher St. by Kenosha-based Bear Development LLC. [Bear Development's](#) plans as of late 2021 called for both new construction and renovating the industrial buildings at the site, which once housed machinery manufacturer Filer & Stowell Co. The revised proposal calls for demolishing industrial buildings at that 10-acre parcel and constructing 576 apartments within six buildings – at a cost of \$180.6 million.

The Common Council last week approved a \$835,000 trust fund grant to help finance the project. Bear had requested \$1.2 million from the fund.

However, Bear now believes 'the most feasible option for redevelopment is the currently proposed concept that requires complete demolition of the existing buildings and new construction of the proposed housing units,' according to the firm's filing with the city.

Both inflated construction costs, and higher interest rates on commercial loans, have affected affordable apartment development plans throughout Wisconsin over the past year.

The project would be among Milwaukee's largest apartment communities. It would target people earning from 40% to 80% of the local median income, or no more than \$60,400 for a two-person household, with those rents set at below-market rates.

Weber also reported that Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley signed a bill recently awarding [Acts Housing](#), a local nonprofit that provides homeownership programs, \$2.5 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds to help boost the nonprofit's acquisition fund.

Last summer, Acts Housing announced the creation of its acquisition fund, which will be used to purchase roughly 100 homes throughout Milwaukee and sell them to Milwaukee renters.

The fund is meant to allow local residents a better opportunity to become homeowners in spite of the significant uptick in home purchases by out-of-state investors.

The high-demand, low-supply housing market has priced many current renters out of the homebuying market and recent interest hikes have also meant mortgage payments are expected to increase. Homes purchased through Acts Housing's fund are expected to help alleviate those barriers to homeownership, with the nonprofit slated to resell the homes it purchases between \$90,000 and \$140,000.

**Human Trafficking** – Discussion was tabled until the next meeting. The VOP Committee is looking for another person that may be interested, passionate, or knowledgeable on the subject of Human Trafficking and willing to report on this topic in future meetings. Please contact the VOP chairperson if you are interested. Or if you know of someone that this topic might appeal to, have that person contact the chairperson directly at: [dabusch99@yahoo.com](mailto:dabusch99@yahoo.com)

**Labor/Minimum Wage** – Dave Busch reported that Wisconsin's seasonally adjusted [unemployment rate](#) for November 2022 was 3.3 percent, unchanged from 3.3 percent in October 2022 and up from 3.1 percent in November 2021. Without seasonal adjustment, November's rate was 2.6 percent, down from 2.8 percent in October 2022 and up from 2.4 percent in November 2021.

The U.S. seasonally adjusted unemployment rate for November 2022 was 3.7 percent, unchanged from 3.7 percent in October 2022 and down from 4.2 percent in November 2021. Without seasonal adjustment, the U.S. rate for November 2022 was 3.4 percent, unchanged from 3.4 percent in October 2022 and down from 3.9 percent in November 2021.

**Waukesha Update:** David Anderson opened by wishing Committee members a Happy New Year! He then reported on an upcoming quarterly membership meeting at the Waukesha Council headquarters on January 23<sup>rd</sup>. The Council leadership will give reports on upcoming events, program changes, and fundraising. Anderson told us that he will be updating us on the latest information from Waukesha after the quarterly meeting. Anderson also reported that Tom Pipines, who is the Director of the Waukesha Council's [St. Dismas Jail Ministry](#) program, will be coming to St. Leonard's SVDP Conference to talk about how the Jail Ministry program works in Waukesha. Mr. Pipines will also be speaking at the upcoming [Men Of Christ](#) Conference as well. One of the successful Jail Ministry programs is Project Angel Tree, which purchases Christmas presents for the children of parents who are incarcerated.

David also provided information on a database program that can be used to manage and track the people that we serve, called [Thrift Works](#), it is a suite of apps for Thrift Store management. The Waukesha Council is looking into adapting this software for their use.

Lastly Anderson updated us on the overflow shelter located at Sentry Avenue and Sunset Drive in an old firehouse. The shelter can sleep 30 people per night and they have shower facilities. He reported that they have been accommodating 18 to 20 people a night on average, but occasionally it will fill up on the really cold nights. Anderson has been delivering pizzas to the shelter when he has left overs from a weekly donation he receives from Little Caesar's in Muskego.

**Racine Update:** Jim Erven reported that the Racine Thrift Store is fully staffed and doing very well, showing the first signs of generating a profit. The store was conceived as a "mission store", not expected to generate profits but more to fulfill their mission to serve the poor where they live. The Racine Council's "Stuff the Truck" event held last month in Burlington was a huge success and generated many high quality items to replenish supplies in both of the Racine Thrift Stores. Jim also reported that [Fannie Mae](#), the Federal Housing Finance Agency, has started a new program to help renters become mortgage holders even though they may not have established credit with the three major credit reporting agencies. The program allows them to earn credit simply by paying their rent every month, without having to secure a credit rating from any other credit agency.

Erven also wanted to mention last month's Action Alert from the USCCB regarding support of H.R. 26 the Born-Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act. This bill establishes requirements for the degree of care a health care practitioner must provide in the case of a child born alive following an abortion or attempted abortion. Jim thought that this was a good example of VoterVoice having a positive effect on meaningful legislation.

Lastly, Jim reported that the expanded Child Tax Credit act failed to pass through Congress and will not be renewed this year. The Child Tax Credit raised 3.7 million children above the poverty level and it is expected that most of those will again slip below the federal poverty level. When you combine this news with the end of the pandemic food money, it likely means tough days ahead for those households in need.

David Anderson redirected a question to Erven after his report. Anderson wanted to know if Racine was using any clothing drop boxes in the community. Anderson stated that he requested a drop box at his parish and it fills up nearly every week. David felt it was a big success in Waukesha and recommended it as a good idea for Racine.

### **Old Business:**

**Mental Health Care for the Poor** – Julie Krahl from the Fond du Lac Council, reported that she has placed calls to a few people that she knows are knowledgeable on this subject and will be interested in investigating with her, the obstacles to mental health care. Julie stated that as she began to make some inquiries with mental health providers, she has learned just how difficult it is to get any information on this topic. She has learned that practitioners in mental health have become scarce and that scarcity has driven up the costs, contributing to the difficulties of obtaining mental health care for the poor. She also reported that she also took a look at what help might be coming from Congress in the near future, but she could not find one bill addressing mental health in the new session. She noted that it is still very early in the new session, and hopes that some relief may be coming later this year.

### **New Business:**

**Standards of Excellence Evaluation** – Kicked off at last year's National Assembly this was promotion of a revised version calling for an evaluation of our organization at all levels. Dave Busch reported that he studied the forms and reports used for this evaluation and that there was no direct reporting required by the Voice Of the Poor Committees. Rather the Councils would cover the health and viability of their VOP groups as a part of their report on the state of the Society. No action by the VOP Committee is required.

Last month Jim Erven speaking on this subject asked what we could do to strengthen the voice of the VOP. Busch stated that most of our efforts across the state are handled by Jim Penczykowski who is the State Coordinator for SVDP Society. Busch agreed to ask Jim to speak with us on this topic at our next meeting.

**Next Meeting:** The next VOP meeting will be held online, on the second Saturday in February. Please plan to join us online on Saturday, Feb. 11, 2023, at 9AM. The login information can be found at the bottom on the last page of these minutes.

**Adjournment:** The meeting was formally adjourned at 11:05 AM, with the VOP members reading a closing prayer together for the New Year.

*“ I am making a new commitment today - not a New Year’s resolution - but a renewed determination to place You where You always belong, first place in my life.”*

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## MILWAUKEE ARCHDIOCESE VOICE OF POOR COMMITTEE

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### Here is the information for logging into the ZOOM Meeting:

St. Vincent de Paul Society of Milwaukee is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting for the VOP Committee monthly meeting.

### Click Here to Join Zoom Meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84435969715?pwd=WFN2NIhkV1c1SVpqd2I1RG5oVklyUT09>

**Or call in (audio only): 312-626-6799**

(Dial by your location. 312 626 6799 is Chicago)

Meeting ID: 844 3596 9715