



# St. Vincent de Paul Society Milwaukee Archdiocese

## Voice Of the Poor Committee

### Minutes from the Meeting held on June 10, 2023

**In Attendance:** Randy Bedore, Dave Busch, Armand Carriere, Jim Erven, Richard Fedler, Tom Jozwik, E. Michael McCann, and John Weber

**Call to Order:** While we waited for all members to log into the Zoom meeting, Dave Busch mentioned that David Anderson wrote to say that he will not be able to attend today's meeting as he is recuperating from injuries he suffered after a recent tumble he took in his driveway. And Sister Julie Krahl wrote that she has some prior commitments on this day and will be unable to join us. The Chairperson then called the meeting to order at 9:08 AM and together we prayed the short version of the opening prayer for St. Vincent de Paul Society meetings.

**Minutes:** The minutes from the VOP meeting held on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023 were emailed to committee members for their review before the start of this meeting. No corrections or additions were submitted and the April minutes were accepted by general consent.

#### Subcommittee Updates:

**Energy** – Dave Busch reported that WE Energies has begun a trial program putting into effect the low income discount rate that was proposed in the rate hike that was approved last year by the [PSC](#). Busch reported that In two more calls from neighbors in need, their utility shutoff was avoided when the customers submitted proof of their income and WE Energies agreed to put both customers on an affordable flat monthly rate based on their ability to pay.

POST MEETING UPDATE: Jim Erven sent Busch a newspaper article that had more detail on the new program. From the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel:

WEC Energy Group and consumer advocates has begun working to create a payment plan for low-income households that would cap utility costs at no more than 6% of household income for qualifying families.

The percentage of income cap, qualification thresholds, how many households would be included and where will be fleshed out through discussions led by staff of Public Service Commission of Wisconsin.

The initiative stems from concerns raised by consumer advocates about the disproportionate impact on low-income households of this year's electric and gas rate increases for WEC Energy Group's We Energies' and Wisconsin Public Service Corp. subsidiaries.

Here's what we know about the issue:

The idea is a holdover from the utilities' 2022 rate cases

The idea was spearheaded by Walnut Way Conservation Corp., a community agency that represents Milwaukee's Lindsay Park neighborhood.

Walnut Way was joined by the Wisconsin Citizens Utility Board and Clean Wisconsin in arguing that gas and electric rate hikes approved last year, particularly a 10.9% increase for We Energies' residential electric customers and 9.4% for WPS customers were excessive and unfairly burdened low-income households.

Walnut Way in its filings during last year's utility rate cases called for a program to cap utility bills at no more than 6% of household income to ease that burden.

Do electric rates have a disproportionate effect on low-income households?

A study of low-income Milwaukee census tracts by the Sierra Club found residents in Milwaukee's poorest and predominantly Black and Hispanic neighborhoods spend as much as 19% of their income on utility bills. The average for low-income residents in the 57 Milwaukee Census tracts included in the study was 12.8%. In the Lindsay Park neighborhood, one of Milwaukee's most economically disadvantaged, the average burden was 19% of household income.

Separately, the PSC also opened dockets to review We Energies' and WPS' Low-Income Forgiveness Tool, ([LIFT](#)) with an eye toward reviewing enrollment, qualifications for participation and the utilities' \$600 down payment requirement for reconnecting service that was cut off for non-payment. The LIFT program was created in 2021 as a pilot program in response to consumer financial pressures at the outset of the coronavirus pandemic.

About half of the roughly 48,000 We Energies customers who might qualify for the program are enrolled in it. Consumer advocates say not enough is done to promote the program, and program rules and income qualifications keep out a large number of people who could benefit from it.

Also, Randy Bedore commented in regard to last month's report on the [Red Barn Wind Park](#), located in Grant County. Randy had come across one of the solar collection farms first hand and described the scale of these solar farms as immense. Randy also noted that the land that solar panels sit on, are no longer being farmed agriculturally because the solar panels sit close to the ground.

John Weber added that some forested land has also been lost to these solar farms as many trees have been cleared to make way for solar collection.

**Housing:** John Weber reported that City of Milwaukee officials, elected leaders and community stakeholders formally kicked off the [Homes MKE](#) initiative last month.

The initiative is a program aimed at creating jobs, lifting up neighborhoods and helping Milwaukeeans become homeowners by renovating 150 vacant city-owned properties into high quality, affordable homes for ownership and rental opportunities.

In 2021, Mayor Cavalier Johnson and members of the Milwaukee Common Council allocated \$15 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funding to the Department of City Development for Homes MKE. Homes MKE is working with both emerging developers and nonprofit organizations to carry out renovation work across 23 neighborhoods throughout Milwaukee.

"We are hopeful that other developers involved follow our lead in hiring from the communities they are working in," said Jim Gaillard with [Ezekiel Community Development Corporation](#), one of the groups working on the initiative.

People interested in purchasing a renovated Homes MKE property can text "homes mke" to: 1-414-708-1182 for more information.

John also reminded us about Legal Action of Wisconsin ([LAW](#)), a group of attorneys and volunteers that provide FREE legal aid across the state, for low-income tenants who are facing eviction. Through their [Eviction Defense Project](#), eligible clients can obtain legal help with their evictions, that can include brief legal advice, document drafting and some in-court representation.

**Hunger/FoodShare:** Tom Jozwik reported that the [Global Report on Food Crisis](#) (GRFC) was released last month by the United Nations. The report concluded that more than 250 million people across 58 countries faced acute hunger due to food shortages in 2022. The numbers show an increase of nearly 50 million people and include five more countries from the previous year. This represents the highest level of food insecurity in the seven year history of this report. The 2022 report concluded that the main drivers for the increase in food shortages were due to climate change effects, the economic effects from the Covid-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine. The U.N. estimates that nearly 20 million people in Ukraine have been displaced by the war with Russia, which represents nearly one-half of their total population.

In the foreword to the report, Secretary-General of the United Nations António Guterres called the crisis unconscionable, stating that this “is a stinging indictment of humanity’s failure to make progress towards Sustainable Development Goal to end hunger, and achieve food security and improved nutrition for all.”

But he also concluded that “This report makes clear that progress is possible. We have the data and know-how to build a more resilient, inclusive, sustainable world where hunger has no home — including through stronger food systems, and massive investments in food security and improved nutrition for all people, no matter where they live.”

The report has listed nineteen different countries having severe food crises for all seven years of that the U.N. GRFC report has been published. The complete report can be found here:

<https://www.wfp.org/publications/global-report-food-crises-2023>

Jozwik also told us that [CBS Moneywatch](#) reported the U.S. is facing an "unprecedented" rise in food insecurity amid persistently high inflation in the grocery aisle and cuts to the food-stamp program earlier this year.

The rise in food insecurity - lacking enough food to live a healthy, active life - comes as the nation has ended the pandemic emergency and the economy continues to be strong. The unemployment rate is near a 50-year low, while wages have been rising for many workers.

But those figures hide a stark reality that's affecting a growing share of U.S. households, ranging from young families to older Americans. Although jobs are plentiful, many employees don't earn enough to cover the surging cost of living, pushing some to make tradeoffs like skipping meals. And cuts to the food-stamp program earlier this year [reduced benefits](#) at a time when groceries are 20% costlier than two years ago. That caused food insecurity to jump to "unprecedented levels" in May among food-stamp recipients, according to a [new survey](#) from Propel, which makes an app for beneficiaries to check balances for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, (formerly known as food stamps).

About 44% of respondents reported skipping meals in the last month, a 7% increase and a record high. Those findings were echoed in a [new study](#) from the Greater Boston Food Bank, which found that some local families are making desperate choices, such as watering down baby formula or other food.

Lastly, Tom reported that the Senior Hunger Prevention Act ([S. 1036](#)) introduced in Congress at the end of March and discussed at last month's VOP meeting, still remains in committee. As previously mentioned, the Skopos Labs prognosis for S. 1036 gives it only a two percent chance of enactment.

**Human Trafficking** – 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. Busch John Weber had had some success in recruiting a person interested in this subject. Busch had hoped that this person would have attended today's meeting but she had written him to say that her plans have changed.

If you are interested in this topic, or if you know of a Vincentian that might be interested in covering this important issue, please have them email the VOP Chairperson directly at: [dabus99@yahoo.com](mailto:dabus99@yahoo.com)

As an aside, Armand Carriere reported that he had the opportunity to visit Anne Haines at St Bakhita House, located on Second Street at Burleigh, prior to our meeting. Anne and the community living at [St. Bakhita House](#) have developed a warm, welcoming residence, supported by a prayerful, socially conscious way of life. Having visited the home in its early days, the transformation is quite remarkable, and they are off to a very good start.

Randy Bedore asked Armand if he knew how many women are currently residing in the house. Armand said there are four women living there who were former sex workers, and three other women residing there as part of the Catholic Worker movement.

Ann continues to rely on a larger community of volunteers and supporters, and has a variety of [volunteer opportunities](#) available.

**Immigration:** Armand Carriere reported that The fear that there would be a surge of migrants across the southern border after the [repeal of Title 42](#) (a Covid requirement barring immigrants for health reasons) was not realized. New regulations controlling border crossings (more screening in countries migrants travel through; an ability to begin the asylum process via a phone app), along with a greater fear of deportation have led to an average of 4,000 immigrants per day approaching the border, down from 13,000 per day before Title 42 was abolished.

The lifting of the Title 42 order does not mean the border is open. When the Title 42 order lifted at on May 11, the United States returned to using Title 8 immigration authorities to expeditiously process and remove individuals who arrive at the U.S. border unlawfully.

One positive note related to immigration surfaced in the month of May when employers added 339,000 jobs, a number much higher than expected. One factor is the inclusion of migrants in the labor force. Measures enacted under the previous administration that prevented even legal immigration have been removed resulting in an increase of over 9% in employment participation of foreign-born workers.

Locally, Armand reported that Greater Milwaukee employers have recognized the value in hiring immigrant workers. An article in the Milwaukee [Journal Sentinel](#) highlighted the efforts of two local businesses that have tapped the immigrant worker pool. With a very low unemployment rate in the state, employers like Husco, a Waukesha manufacturer of hydraulic and electro-mechanical systems for cars, sees hiring immigrants as a way of solving the problem of staffing. They have hired immigrants from Myanmar and Afghanistan, trained them, and made them an effective part of their workforce.

Carriere also told us about [Engage Workforce Solutions](#), a Milwaukee workforce development service, that is providing front-end training and orientation for immigrants seeking employment. They consider themselves a workforce accelerator, working with partner businesses by preparing immigrant clients for potential employment. Engage is led by an immigrant himself who understands the challenges facing immigrants new to the country and facing a new work environment.

**Mental Health Care** – Julie Krahl was unable to attend this meeting. Discussion on this topic was tabled until the next meeting.

**Minimum Wage/Labor** – Dave Busch reported that The Department of Workforce Development ([DWD](#)) today released the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) preliminary employment estimates for the month of May 2023, which showed Wisconsin's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate stayed at the record-low rate of 2.4%.

Nationwide for the month of May, the U.S. unemployment rate was 3.7%, 1.3 percentage points above Wisconsin's rate, and the national labor force participation rate of 62.6% was 2.5 percentage points below the state rate.

In brief, the data for Wisconsin is all good news:

- **Metropolitan Statistical Areas:** Preliminary April 2023 unemployment rates decreased in all 12 Wisconsin metro areas over the month. Over the year, all 12 Wisconsin metro areas had rates decrease. Appleton and La Crosse (1.8%) both tied their lowest unemployment rates for any month going back to Jan. 1990. Green Bay tied its Dec. 2022 rate of 2%.
- **Municipalities:** Preliminary April 2023 unemployment rates decreased or stayed the same in 28 of Wisconsin's 35 largest cities over the month. Over the year, 34 Wisconsin cities had unemployment rates decrease or stay the same. Seven cities tied or had all-time low unemployment rates since data collection began: De Pere = 1.8%; Green Bay = 2.1%; Janesville = 2.4%; Manitowoc = 2.2%; Muskego = 1.6%; Neenah = 1.6%; Sun Prairie at 1.6%
- **Counties:** Preliminary April 2023 unemployment rates show over-the-month unemployment rates declined or remained unchanged in 67 counties, with 60 counties reaching a new record low unemployment rate for April and 19 reaching or tying their lowest rates on record.

The only bad news, was that the number of new jobs available in Wisconsin continues to increase as baby boomers continue to age out of the workforce.

Randy Bedore added some anecdotal evidence from a local businessman who reported that he travels frequently for business and he spoke to Randy about the difficulty of hiring new employees in Wisconsin. He contrasted that with the ease of finding new employees in Texas, aided in part by the high number of immigrants in the workforce there.

Armand Carriere asked if Wisconsin seasonal businesses (i.e., the Dells, Door County) recruit foreign workers. Busch replied that yes, this practice still continues as many of the companies offering summer jobs recruit young foreign student workers in countries that have a similar school calendar to ours along with a high percentage of English speaking students.

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

**Racine Update:** Jim Erven reported that the Racine Council was presented with a first right of refusal on the property that houses their newest [Thrift Store](#). The building, located 2118 Rapids Drive in Racine, was recently put up for sale by the owners. The Council has decided not to exercise their right, and will allow the building to go on the marketplace. The Council has a multi-year lease on the building and expects that the new landlord will choose to continue the current lease.

Erven also reported that the Racine Council is continuing their digital recruiting efforts in an attempt to bolster their membership with younger people. They have contracted with a service provider that has started a [multichannel marketing](#) program that they hope will stir up a good amount of online inquiries. Recruitment numbers will depend on how well the council can respond to the inquiries. Jim suggested that this might be a good idea for the archdiocesan council and/or our efforts to expand the VOP statewide.

Erven then updated us on his work to help make the VOP more of a statewide voice. He has volunteered to work with Jim Penczykowski to strengthen the VOP in areas outside of Madison and Milwaukee.

Penczykowski had emailed Erven and Busch and copied us on efforts by the North Central Region to bolster participation in the VOP and VoterVoice. Penczykowski included a letter from Pam Matambanadzo, who is a North Central Region VOP Board member, which confirmed that the Regional VPs and National Council Members, have a goal to increase local VOP efforts this year. They are particularly interested in increasing VoterVoice participation in every state, because it serves as an objective measurement of the effectiveness of the VOP.

Erven stated that he felt that this will require a wide variety of efforts on our part to bring VOP committees to the rest of the state, and increase recruitment in the VOP locally, and continue to promote subscriptions to VoterVoice. He suggested a two pronged approach. The first prong would encompass recruitment from within the society. It would begin with a strategizing session to uncover the hurdles to recruiting new members into the VOP from within the society. With those hurdles identified we could then try to infuse greater coverage of the VOP mission into the Ozanam Orientation training, to create greater awareness of the role of the VOP and instill a sense of mission at the very beginning of the Vincentians' journey.

From there we could look into expanding our voice by establishing the VOP as a more autonomous entity. This might encompass broadening the bylaws at the Council level to create a secondary vice-presidents position within the Council for the head of the VOP. Jim admittedly stated that this is likely more of a long term goal or solution.

The second prong of our approach should look towards recruiting new members from outside of the society. This approach is likely to require more of the digital marketing tactics that we had discussed earlier, but could help us clear many of our hurdles all in one step.

Another step in this effort to recruit outside of the society, would be to partner with other non-profit groups that serve the poor, in order to increase our public awareness, increase our visibility to the public. Busch stated that these were all great ideas and that he will set up a conference call to brainstorm with Penczykowski on this topic, as soon as possible.

**Criminal Justice** - E. Michael McCann was able to join us late in our meeting and filed this update on Criminal Justice. Mike first updated us on [AB57/SB86](#), which if passed would require a prosecutor to first get a judge's approval to dismiss, defer prosecution, or amend a charge, for any number of serious crimes. The bill passed the Assembly with all Republicans voting in favor and all Democrats voting against the bill. If passed McCann believes the law would eventually be challenged by a number of lawsuits and likely end up in the Wisconsin supreme court.

Next McCann spoke about [AB47/SB48](#) which will eliminate the exception to the open meetings law for parole boards. This bill changes the open meetings requirement for the Parole Commission, provides specific notice requirements for meetings of the Parole Commission, and requires information about parole decisions to be posted on the Department of Corrections Internet site. The bill passed the Assembly with bipartisan support and seems poised to pass the Senate as well. McCann felt this was good legislation and no reason for VOP to get involved. Mike then reported that the bill in favor of expansion of Medicaid in Wisconsin is likely dead, but there is one area of the expansion that seems to have bipartisan support. The proposal to expand postpartum Medicaid coverage for new mothers from 90 days to one year after giving birth, is still included in the budget bill. McCann believes this will greatly benefit poor mothers, would likely receive the support we need from our Board, and is something that we should publicly speak in favor of. The Wisconsin Bishops have come out in favor of this proposal.

Lastly McCann reminded us that the Expungement of Records bill, [AB57/SB86](#), is still stuck in committee and seems to be losing momentum.

Our VoterVoice campaign has been approved and is ready for release as soon as the prospect of a vote on this bill should come up. We are waiting to hear news on any movement on this from the Wisconsin Catholic Conference and are set to launch. But Busch suggested that maybe we should change the aim of the VoterVoice campaign from “pass this bill” to “bring this bill to a vote”. The committee members felt that we should take a wait and see approach for now. In closing, Mike asked Busch if our efforts to support the bill promoting a tax deduction for mental health practitioners in Wisconsin was approved by our Board. Busch stated that he ran out of time at the April Board meeting, but the Board did agree to take up this issue via an email vote. Busch said that he would write up an email proposal asking for the Board to support this issue publicly and will send his draft to McCann for edit and review.

### **Old Business:**

**Revitalization of the VOP** – At last month’s VOP meeting, Busch opened the floor for discussion among the committee members regarding what we can do to revitalize the VOP Committee. Some of the ideas that came out of that discussion were; the length of the meetings, more fellowship needed, increased emphasis on increasing spirituality, need for more give and take on topics. Randy Bedore suggested that perhaps posting the recording of our meeting on YouTube could help keep people engaged in our work, even when they might not be able to attend a meeting. Sister Julie wrote and added that she would like to see stronger informational ties to her Fondu Lac Council. The Chairperson agreed these were all achievable goals.

Busch also mentioned that the Executive Board members all send in their reports to each other via email, in advance of their quarterly meetings. That way, less discussion is needed and the meeting time can be used for more give and take conversation and to resolve any questions the members have regarding each report. The Committee agreed to try a new format for their upcoming August meeting.

Busch will send a separate email request to all VOP members asking them to reply to the group with their monthly report in writing. Then we will try to generate more back and forth conversational style reporting during the August meeting.

Busch also agreed to try to set up an in-person meeting for September, possibly held at the Milwaukee Thrift Store located on Hwy 100 at Layton Avenue.

### **New Business:**

**SVDP Society Awareness Month** – Dave Busch reminded our members that the VOP Committee sponsors St. Vincent de Paul Awareness Month annually in October. Most of the work is provided by the central office staff, and to that end they get our full gratitude for a job well done. VOP members agreed to continue the tradition of promoting awareness of the SVDP Society, but also agreed that it would be a good time to do another online poll to estimate the number of councils that are participating in Awareness month activities.

**Group Reading Project?** – John Weber reminded us about attending a housing forum held at the Unitarian Church in Waukesha on March 18<sup>th</sup> sponsored by [SOPHIA](#) a member of Wisdom. The forum was titled In the Spirit of Community "A Call to End Homelessness". This event featured guest speaker Kevin Nye author of "[Grace Can Lead Us Home](#), A Christian Call to End Homelessness". Weber stated that he was inspired to buy the book and he reports that it is an excellent read that covers all aspects of homelessness, including mental health, addiction and recovery. John is recommending that we should all read this as our next group reading project,

describing the book as “very enlightening”. Nye is an assistant director of programs at the Center in Hollywood serving unhoused people. Busch agreed that we could take this on as our next group reading project, but suggested it would be better to wait until next year to begin this read. Weber agreed to remind us again at the end of this year.

**Next Meeting:** We will take our customary summer recess next month. There will not be a VOP meeting in July. The next VOP meeting will be held virtually on the second Saturday in August. Please plan to join us online on Saturday August 12, 2023 at 9AM. The login information can be found at the bottom of these minutes on the last page.

**Adjournment:** The meeting was formally adjourned at 10:53 AM, with the VOP members reading a closing prayer together for serenity this summer...

*“This summer Lord, give us the eyes of Jesus to see our neighbors and the strangers we meet”*

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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>
Julie Krahl	<a href="mailto:julieann5202@charter.net">julieann5202@charter.net</a>
Lavinia Vollrath	<a href="mailto:loveyvollrath@gmail.com">loveyvollrath@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>

### 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