



St. Vincent de Paul Society Milwaukee Archdiocese

Voice Of the Poor Committee

Minutes from the Meeting held on September 9, 2023

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

Call to Order: The Zoom meeting began with some conversation about VOP members upcoming knee surgeries, and was called to order at 9:08AM. 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 August 12, 2023 were sent to the VOP members in advance of this meeting and with no further corrections or additions having been submitted, the August VOP minutes were accepted by general consent.

Subcommittee Updates:

Energy – Dave Busch reported that WE Energies has applied for another rate increase in 2024. *Electric increase:* \$86 million (2.5% increase), *Natural gas increase:* \$23.9 million, (4.5% increase) The Citizens Utility Board ([CUB](#)) reports that four major utilities serving Wisconsin customers are seeking increases on bills that, if approved, would take effect Jan. 1, 2024. A fifth utility, Wisconsin Public Service, while still proposing to increase base rates, anticipates that increase would be offset by declining fuel costs.

Consistent with their focus on affordability and lower profits for monopoly utilities, CUB will weigh in with their own testimony showing how to bring down the cost to Wisconsin residents.

You can keep up to date on [the CUB Active Cases](#) page, which contains links to the PSC hearing notice for each case, as well as links to the [PSC public comments page](#).

Remember that the public has a role to play as well.

The [PSC](#) recently opened its public comment periods and scheduled public hearings for the big rate cases. Customers may submit comments [online at the PSC website](#) or attend a Zoom or in-person hearing.

Here are the links to the WE Energies hearings:

Oct. 9, WE Energies: [Attend the public hearing](#) at 2 p.m. or 6 p.m. Monday, Oct. 9 at Clinton Rose Senior Center, 3045 N. Martin Luther King Drive, Milwaukee.

Attend via [Zoom here](#), or by telephone at 312-626-6799 using Meeting ID 809 513 2930.

Busch suggested that it would be good to get public comments from some neighbors in need. Jim Erven mentioned that in Racine they have a monthly forum with lead home visitors where they discuss the needs of people they have visited. Erven thought that he might be able to find someone willing to submit comments on how another rate hike will affect them.

Hunger/FoodShare: Tom Jozwik reported that Harvest Public Media, a collaboration of public media newsrooms in the U.S. Midwest, produced a story on the 2023 Farm Bill recently. The [Harvest Public Media story](#) reported that with only 11 days left on the legislative calendar, Congress is being pressured to produce a new Farm Bill or file an extension of the current 2018 bill by September 30, the 2018 bill's expiration date. But there does not seem to be a consensus as to how costly the bill should be. Illinois Republican Congressman Mike Bost, a member of the House Agriculture Committee, is quoted as favoring "the most budget neutral [bill] as possible." Bost wants to strengthen insurance for specialty crops while keeping the stricter requirements for food assistance negotiated by his party in the June debt ceiling deal. "Realistically," the congressman from southern Illinois said, "we know that [the new bill] is going to be more expensive"—more expensive because of shifting crop prices and increased food prices. In fact, the Congressional Budget Office has estimated that, even with no changes from the 2018 bill, the new one could exceed \$1 trillion for the first time ever.

Earlier (August 28), Harvest Public Media put out an article headlined "[SNAP Remains Target for the GOP](#) as the Farm Bill Deadline Looms and Food Insecurity Rises." Already this summer, legislators acted to expand work requirements for SNAP beneficiaries. Several Agriculture Committee Democrats last month sent a letter to House Speaker McCarthy requesting that GOP lawmakers **not** seek additional SNAP changes.

The article also mentioned that Food insecurity has risen across the country this year as the [end of emergency food support](#) and higher food costs, strain low-income households.

More than 27 million people are living in households that haven't had enough food in the last week, according to the latest data from [U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey](#). That's up about 11% from the first two weeks of January.

Busch wondered why the more social aspects of the Farm Bill, such as the SNAP program, should not be broken out separately from this super large spending bill. He noted it is especially important to continue SNAP (FoodShare) at this time, when food insecurity is on the rise and we are seeing an increase in need at our meal sites and food pantries. Dick Fedler confirmed that the numbers of people served at the meal sites are up this year, David Anderson confirmed the number of people served at Waukesha meal sites are also up, and Jim Erven reported that Racine meal sites numbers were up since the end of pandemic, but since then, the number of people being helped has remained steady. Jim also cited numbers from the [USCCB](#) Action Alert in support of extending the Farm Bill; the Farm Bill helps feed 34 million people in the US, 9 million of which are children, there are seven major food components in the bill that in essence, compete against each other for funding.

With the farm bill deadline looming, hunger relief advocates are not optimistic the bill will pass this year.

POST METING NOTE: The 2018 Farm Bill was not renewed and expired at midnight on September 30 while Congress continues its work to deliver a 2023 Farm Bill before the end of the calendar year.

Housing: John Weber did some checking on the emergency rental assistance program that we discussed last month, which had stopped taking applications back in June due to exhausting the extra pandemic funding they had received. The fund had been allocated about 80 million dollars in pandemic relief funds at the end of 2021. The county had awarded more than 70 million dollars in aid and stated that the funds have helped 12,000 households avoid eviction (an average of \$5,833 per household). The question was raised as to what happened to the rest of the fund and will the program start up again. Weber reported that they were able to get more funding as of September 1st. People in need of rent assistance can contact the Wisconsin Emergency Rental Assistance program at <https://wera.help> to start the application process, or call them directly at 800-506-5596.

Mike Howden had sent along an article in [Milwaukee Neighborhood News](#) that gave some background on the Rental Assistance program.

Weber next reported on a story about residents living in public housing calling out Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee (HACM) for what they say is widespread negligence with its accounting practices, causing financial and emotional distress to its mostly low-income, elderly or disabled renters. Many of the residents have been working over the past year with [Common Ground](#), a coalition of faith groups, local businesses and other organizations, that has been advocating for people in public housing.

HACM spokesperson Amy Hall said the agency has been transitioning to a new software system, so some of the rent issues stem from that implementation. Since the pandemic, the Housing Authority has also struggled with staffing shortages and supply chain disruptions, according to Hall. Government pay is less competitive than the private sector, which makes it harder to recruit and retain staff.

John also provided this short list of local housing resources and websites:

[Milwaukee Housing Choice Voucher Program](#) (Section 8 Rent Assistance)

5011 W. Lisbon Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53210

General Inquiries: (414) 286-5650

[West Allis Housing Department](#)

7525 W Greenfield Ave, Milwaukee, WI 53214

414-302-8430

[Waukesha Housing Authority](#)

600 Arcadian Ave, Waukesha, WI 53186

262-542-2262

Randy Bedore added that his conference covers a wide territory and has had contact with eight different public housing properties. A lot of the problems inside the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee are due to poor management at the top. Residents have been complaining of a lack of response from the city on [problems with the properties](#).

Criminal Justice - E. Michael McCann began by reporting that the Expungement of Records Bill that we are supporting, [AB37/SB38](#), has had no movement whatsoever in the legislature. He also reported that other measures we support have not been passed. The new budget bill was passed without expanding Medicaid, without the provision to raise the minimum wage and without expanding postpartum aid for new mothers to one year.

He also updated us on bill [AB57/SB86](#), which 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, which has had no movement on it as well.

McCann next told us about shift in attitudes by Republican legislators to help immigrants get drivers licenses. Farm owners across Wisconsin rely on a labor force that they know is largely undocumented, to do the dirty, dangerous work that makes this multibillion-dollar industry go. For decades, driver licenses had been available to immigrant drivers up until a federal law blocked them in 2007. Since that time, states have had to individually work to get them back. Nineteen states, most recently Minnesota, have passed laws that make driver licenses accessible to all eligible residents, regardless of immigration status. A number of Republican lawmakers and local officials from the area who met with law enforcement officials, dairy farmers, civic leaders and immigration rights advocates in Abbotsford in March to discuss the impact on the community, of undocumented immigrants not being able to obtain driver's licenses. McCann stated that a recent Pro Publica news article explained the complexities of this issue in great detail. You can read more about this here:

<https://www.propublica.org/article/wisconsin-immigration-driving-licenses-dairy-farms-politics#>:

McCann believes this issue is common sense, the entire dairy industry depends on immigrant labor, those laborers need to drive to and from their jobs; should we consider supporting this effort to give driver's licenses to undocumented laborers?

A second item McCann asked us to consider supporting is the [Gun Shop Project](#), an effort to reduce gun suicides in Wisconsin.

Chuck Lovelace, a gun shop owner in Park Falls, was approached seven years ago about spearheading an effort to prevent gun suicides – starting at his own gun shop.

The idea was simple yet powerful: Train those at the counter of the gun store to be extra alert for signs of possible suicidal intentions, and to better use their discretion to deny such sales; and offer temporary storage of guns at the shop for anyone who wanted them, even for a short time, out of their house. No questions. No judgment. And no police or other government involvement.

Today, [there are nearly 40 gun shops](#) in Wisconsin participating in the suicide prevention education effort, known as the “Gun Shop Project.” Many of those stores also offer to take in guns temporarily, an effort known as the “Safe Storage Initiative.”

There is a bipartisan gun bill in the Wisconsin legislature now, [AB173/SB205](#) that requires the Department of Health Services to award grants to organizations or coalitions of organizations, including cities, villages, towns, counties, and federally recognized American Indian tribes or bands, for 1) training staff at a firearm retailer or firearm range on how to recognize a person that may be considering suicide; 2) providing suicide prevention materials for distribution at a firearm retailer or firearm range; or 3) providing voluntary, temporary firearm storage for the lawful owner of a firearm.

McCann believes this is a rare gun bill that has bipartisan support and would be worth our support. We know from the study of gun violence in Milwaukee that gun violence affects the poor in greater numbers. We don't know, or maybe can't know how many of the poor this would affect.

VOP members agreed to take a “wait and see” approach on this bill.

Human Trafficking – The VOP Committee is looking for someone that may be interested, passionate, or knowledgeable on the subject of Human Trafficking and willing to report on this topic in future meetings.

Armand Carriere reported that Anne Haines is about to celebrate the one year anniversary of the opening of the St. Bakhita Catholic Worker House in Milwaukee. [Saint Bakhita House](#) provides a supportive community for women survivors escaping sexual exploitation and human sex trafficking. A small celebration is planned for October First.

Immigration: Armand Carriere opened by reporting on [Legal Status for Ukrainians](#) - The Biden administration has announced a major expansion of temporary legal status for Ukrainian refugees already living in the US. The temporary status was originally scheduled to expire on Oct 19, 2023 but is being extended to April, 2025. The Temporary Protective Status that was offered to Ukrainians was also extended to refugees from other countries, including Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, all countries dealing with civil strife or natural disasters. Unfortunately, the status of refugees from these last four countries is being challenged in states like Texas, given that most of these refugees are crossing into the US through our southern border.

[Southern Border Crossings](#) – Record numbers of migrant families came across the U.S. – Mexico border in August. This came in direct opposition to the Biden plan designed to discourage parents from entering illegally with children. Border Patrol agents arrested at last 91,000 migrants who crossed as part of a family group in August, exceeding the prior one-month record of 84,486 set in May, 2019 during the Trump administration.

An estimated 177,000 migrants were arrested at the border in August, up from 132,000 in July and 99,000 in June. The 177,000 number includes the aforementioned 91,000 who crossed as families.

Biden's policies that replaced the Trump administration policies have made it easier to legally enter the US via a mobile app but have also increased the number of migrants barred from entering the country.

As stated in earlier reports to the VOP, this will continue to be a major problem until Congress is serious about addressing a solution. And for Biden, this becomes a major re-election issue.

[Floating Barriers in the Rio Grande River](#) – A federal judge has ordered Texas to reposition floating barriers that Governor Greg Abbott had placed in the middle of the Rio Grande river in an attempt to deter illegal border crossings. The barriers were deemed to be a hazard to public safety, navigation, and the operation of federal agency officials in and around the Rio Grande. The judge ruled that the river is an international waterway where the federal government has jurisdiction. Numerous advocacy organizations had pointed out the danger to migrants attempting to cross the river, citing the placement of the barriers as cruel and inhumane. Texas appealed that decision and on the Friday before our VOP Meeting the federal [judge's order to reposition the barriers was stayed](#).

Busch asked if anyone had heard news reports about immigrants from other continents are now showing up at our border with Mexico. [Reuters News](#) Service reports that large numbers of migrants from Africa, Libya, and Iraq have been reported in Mexico, indicating a thriving business in human trafficking in Mexico.

Lastly, Armand reported that locally, there is a craft fair scheduled on Saturday, September 16th at the [Lynden Sculpture Gardens](#) featuring art and crafts work from immigrant populations from Africa, Asia and others. Food will be served by Afghan immigrants.

Mental Health Care – Sister Julie Krahl continued her report on what a blow it was for Wisconsin to include 500 million dollars in the Governor's budget proposal for new mental health spending, and only receive less than 40 million. As a result, the state (and the Fond du Lac SVDP Council) is looking for new ways to make the dollars stretch. So in Fond du Lac, instead of paying for individual therapy sessions with clinical psychologists, they will be looking at paying for alternative sessions such as yoga lessons for stress relief, drum circles, healing crystals, and other homeopathic therapies that are less expensive. And Julie admitted that she is one to believe in alternative therapies, but she cannot help but see the sadness of bringing in drums because they can't afford clinical therapy sessions.

Next, Julie reported that the Wisconsin [Poor Peoples Campaign](#) has really focused in on the "[unwinding](#)" of the roles for Medicaid. The Poor Peoples Campaign has pointed out that nearly two-thirds of eligible Medicaid recipients that have been unenrolled, have not as of this date, reenrolled. The Poor Peoples Campaign describes poverty as "the fourth leading cause of death, claiming more lives than homicide, gun violence, diabetes or obesity". And they are reminding people that they only have until October 18th to complete their renewal for Medicaid eligibility, online here: <https://access.wisconsin.gov/access/>

More information can be found on the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) [website](#). The Wisconsin Department of Health Services has a new webpage showing [statewide data](#) on BadgerCare Plus and Wisconsin Medicaid enrollment, following the end of the continuous coverage requirement.

David Anderson asked Sister Julie if she knew of a booklet or if she could find any pamphlet with guidelines for recognizing the symptoms of mental health problems, and perhaps have tips on how to approach people with mental health problems. He reasoned that as Vincentians doing home visits, we really do not receive training on this matter. Sister Julie said she did not know of any items like this but she will be on the lookout for something we could use. She also reminded us about the delicate nature of assuming, or pointing out, that someone has mental health issues, without our foreknowledge of this.

Dave Busch mentioned a few other resources in Milwaukee County: The suicide prevention hotline can be reached by dialing 988. The Milwaukee County Mental Health Emergency Center (MHEC) is the new county-wide psychiatric emergency department located at 1525 N. 12th Street in the City of Milwaukee. They are available 24/7 – 365.

If you or anyone you know is experiencing a mental health emergency, call the Milwaukee County 24-hour Crisis Line (414) 257-7222.

Minimum Wage/Labor – Dave Busch reported that the Wisconsin unemployment rate for July was up slightly from the previous month. The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development ([DWD](#)) released the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimates of unemployment for Wisconsin metropolitan areas, major cities and counties in Wisconsin for July 2023.

In brief, the non-seasonally adjusted data for Wisconsin shows July unemployment up slightly at 2.6 percent, compared to 2.5 percent last month, and the U.S. unemployment rate at 3.6 percent, unchanged from June.

The Good News: Historically low or tied July unemployment rates in 18 counties, 8 major cities and one metro area compared to July unemployment rates in previous years.

The Bad News: Unemployment in Southeastern Wisconsin continues to be higher than the state average, with Milwaukee at 4.6 percent. Beloit at 4.7 percent, and Racine at 4.8 percent, these cities had the highest unemployment rates in the state. Kenosha comes in at 3.9 percent, Waukesha at 3.1 percent unemployment.

And still no movement on increasing the state minimum wage. As of the Sept. VOP meeting, no new minimum wage bills have been introduced in the current session of the state legislature.

Racine Update: Jim Erven reported that the new Racine Thrift Store is holding its own and doing well. Sales were up ten percent for the month of August and the managers feel that the store is moving in the right direction.

Next Erven reported that the Racine Council has a first draft version of their planned [multichannel marketing](#) program. They are feeling more confident that this campaign will reach out beyond their parish and local boundaries, and are optimistic that this will stir up a wide-spread amount of online recruitment. The campaign was formed due to concerns over attrition in the Society due to Vincentians aging out. So they felt the need to attract middle age and younger recruits. A launch date for the campaign has not yet been set, but they expect to decide that soon.

The Racine Council has held a number of successful “stuff the truck” events at several parishes in Racine, resulting in a good number of items for stocking the Thrift Stores.

Invitations were sent out to all Racine Conference to attend a community mass for Vincentians to be held on the feast day of St. Vincent de Paul (September 27th).

Erven then updated us on the Racine Council’s efforts to adopt the Archdiocese Safeguarding policy. They are in the process of reviewing the 16 page document from the Archdiocese to determine how to best put the [Safeguarding program](#) into practice. Implementation of the policy is going to be extensive, and will require criminal background checks. They are struggling (as are most other Councils) with which individuals need to go through the training - associates, volunteers in the stores, occasional volunteers at meal programs, etc.

Erven then reported to us about the Wisconsin Catholic Conference reminder published this month to support the [USCCB Action Alert](#) for funding the Women, Infants and Childrens Program now in front of the US Congress.

Lastly Jim also wanted to bring attention to SVDP National CEO Dave Barringer’s message asking for donations to the [Disaster Relief Campaign](#). They are in real need of funds right now in light of the recent fires in Hawaii, flooding in California, and Hurricane Idalia battering Florida. Erven also wanted to remind us to help spread the word about the unwinding of the Medicaid roles.

He stated that the reenrollment process actually amounts to a disenrollment process. As many as one half of the people who have been disenrolled and are eligible to reenroll have not done so. And the people who need Medicaid the most, the elderly and disabled poor, are also not reenrolling, at the rate of about 1 in four. Jim repeated what Sister Julie had told us before, you can check the numbers on the DHS website here:

<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/medicaid/renewal-data.htm>

Waukesha Update: David Anderson reported that Waukesha is holding in person [Ozanam Orientation training](#) at the Thrift Store on Saturday September 30 from 8:30 to 1:30.

Next Anderson reported that a special meeting was held to discuss what to do with an oversupply of goods being donated to their Thrift Stores. They have so many goods that they are looking for warehouse space to sort and hold merchandise until they can get things into the store. Busch mentioned that due to the pandemic, Goodwill stores have stopped accepting furniture donations, which could be contributing to the recent surplus.

Lastly Anderson reported that their back to school program this year was able to put together and distribute 500 backpacks loaded with school supplies to children in need. The 500 backpacks set a new record high number for the back to school drive.

Old Business:

SVDP GALA – Dave Busch reported on the SVDP Archdiocese Council holding a [Gala at The Gage](#) in West Allis on Thursday Sept 27th, the feast of St. Vincent. The event is designed as a fund raiser and is aimed at people who donate to worthy causes, and will feature a silent auction.

VoterVoice Action Alert – VOP Chairperson Busch suggested that it might be time to launch our VoterVoice Expungement of Records campaign. Since the bill seems to be languishing in committee, we might help get it to the floor for a vote by changing the wording slightly in our message on VoterVoice to encourage people to contact their representatives and let them know they are in favor of getting this bill up for a vote. And further asking their representative to vote FOR this bill, to give minor offenders a second chance at getting back into society by making it easier for them to obtain a decent job. VOP member Mike McCann made a motion to launch our Voter Voice Campaign, John Weber seconded the motion and the members unanimously agreed to this launch the Action Alert. Busch stated that he would contact SVDP State Coordinator Jim Penczykowski for his take on this.

SVDP Society Awareness Month – Busch reminded the VOP Committee members that St. Vincent de Paul Awareness Month is set for October.

The [Awareness Month Booklet](#) was sent out to all Conference Presidents and all Archdiocesan Council Presidents, along with a note from VOP Chair Dave Busch encouraging all conferences to participate in at least one Awareness Month activity, and reminding them all to sure to stress the broader benefits of being a member of the SVDP Society; increasing spirituality, strengthening friendships through shared experiences, and the rewards felt from serving those in need.

More information can be found here:

<https://svdpmilw.org/vincentian-resources-recursos-de-vicentinos.aspx>

New Business:

Next New VOP VoterVoice Action Alert – What action can we take on promoting better mental health care in Wisconsin? No particular legislative action is on the horizon but the VOP Committee members agreed to consider the idea.

Next Meeting: The next VOP meeting will be held virtually on the second Saturday in October. Please plan to join us online on Saturday October 14, 2023 at 9 AM. The login information can be found at the bottom of these minutes on the last page.

Adjournment: The meeting went quickly, ran a little long, and we formally adjourned at 11:08 pm with the VOP members praying together, a prayer for the beginning of Autumn...

“May the harvest from the fields remind us of the abundance we have been given and the bounty we are to share with others.”

#

MILWAUKEE ARCHDIOCESE VOICE OF POOR COMMITTEE

Armand Carriere	ae2425@gmail.com
David Anderson	ajand1339@gmail.com
David Busch	dabusch99@yahoo.com
E. Michael McCann	emichaelmccann@yahoo.com
Jim Erven	erven.jm@gmail.com
John Weber	jjweber46@sbcglobal.net
Julie Krahl	julieann5202@charter.net
Michael Howden	mjhowden@att.net
Randy Bedore	ranshorewood@yahoo.com
Richard Fedler	rfedler@aol.com
Rob Shelledy	shelledyr@archmil.org
Rose Lue-Hing	414-445-9224
Tom Jozwik	mjozwik@hotmail.com

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’s 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