



# St. Vincent de Paul Society Milwaukee Archdiocese

## Voice Of the Poor Committee

### Minutes from the Meeting held on November 12, 2022

**In Attendance:** Dave Busch, Armand Carriere, Jim Erven, Richard Fedler, Tom Jozwik, John Weber, and newly elected Fond du Lac Council President Michael Breszee

**Call to Order:** A few of the Committee members had some minor technical problems logging into the Zoom meeting. After a few minutes spent while members patiently sorted out their computer settings, the Chairperson called the meeting together at 9:10 AM as we prayed together, the opening prayer for Society meetings.

**Minutes:** No Minutes were taken for the October VOP meeting due to the very limited attendance at last month's meeting. Those in attendance at the October meeting had some general discussion regarding the Wisconsin and nationwide midterm elections. There was some general agreement that part of the reason for this committee's loss of momentum was due to the six month recess of the state legislature.

#### Subcommittee Updates:

**Energy** – Dave Busch opened this month's updates by reminding us that the home heating season has begun. People in need should apply now for Energy Assistance. Energy assistance is a one-time payment during the heating season (October 1-May 15). The fund pays a portion of energy costs, and the amount of the energy assistance benefit depends on a variety of factors, including the household's size, income, and energy costs.

Vincetians can get more information on eligibility requirements here:

<https://energyandhousing.wi.gov/Pages/AgencyResources/energy-assistance.aspx>

Busch then reported that WE Energies made a surprise change to the rate hike proposal case that we have been following. Just days before public hearings were to begin, WE Energies doubled the amount of their proposed price hike. Power bills for a lot of people in southeast Wisconsin could see a double-digit jump. The utility company asked state regulators for a 13 percent electric rate hike. That is twice the increase that the company had originally proposed. WE Energies says it needs to raise rates to help keep-up with rising costs and inflation. The utility company says the average increase for homeowners will be almost 15 dollars per-month. They are also asking state regulators to okay a natural gas rate hike that could be as much as 13 percent more.

This information came out just before public hearings on the rate case were to begin, leaving the public and the Citizens Utility Board ([CUB](#)) with very little time to prepare a counter point to present to the Public Service Commission.

WE Energies spokesman Brendan Conway said the change is because of rising costs and said their rates are still below the national average. "Fuel costs went up a lot over the summer. The price of natural gas spiked, price of coal spiked – two of our major fuel sources that we use currently" Conway stated.

CUB has expressed dismay to the Public Service Commission in their testimony and legal briefs in the case. “Simply put, forcing residential customers to bear the brunt of this year’s increase should not happen, and the utilities have pulled the rug out from under the residential customers by switching positions, from initially favoring residential customers with a *smaller increase*, to now making residential customers shoulder a much *higher than average* increase.”

If approved at the requested 13 percent increase, it will result in an estimated increase of \$175 annually. Due to the short amount of time from the increase in the requested rate hike came out, until the end of the public comments period, the VOP Committee was unable to put together any comment or call for action on this.

The Public Service Commission is expected to release the final decision on the rate hike request before the end of November.

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

**Health Care –** 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 Health Care 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 at: [dabusch99@yahoo.com](mailto:dabusch99@yahoo.com)

**Housing:** John Weber reported that faced with an influx of out-of-state investors gobbling up properties, [ACTS Housing](#) is launching a homeowner acquisition fund to purchase Milwaukee homes and resell them at affordable prices to city residents.

The fund, which the group hopes will eventually tally \$11 million, plans to purchase at least 100 homes in 2023 and resell them to individual buyers. Acts Housing makes it possible for families with barriers (credit, savings, financial, language, etc.) to become homeowners. They provide home buyer and financial counseling, real estate brokerage, and rehab expertise.

Nearly 400 Milwaukee homes have been purchased by three out-of-state based investor companies so far this year alone. That puts them on a pace to nearly double the number of homes they purchased last year. John Johnson, a Marquette University research fellow and housing expert who gathered those figures, said the out-of-state investor influence in the market makes it nearly impossible for low-to-moderate income renters to buy homes.

The nonprofit has already raised \$3 million toward its \$11 million goal through multiple grants, including a \$1 million grant from the [Zilber Family Foundation](#).

The group said it is submitting requests to the city and county for additional funds, including money earmarked in the [American Rescue Plan Act](#) for affordable housing.

John also reported that Fannie Mae has launched a [Multifamily Positive Rent Payment Reporting pilot program](#), offering a national lifeline to aspiring homeowners with no established credit history.

This latest rent reporting program allows the renters of multifamily properties to report their rent payment history. Fannie Mae updated its computer-automated system to include bank records showing consistent rent payments by individuals. The system, called the Desktop Underwriter, is used by lenders to evaluate the creditworthiness of mortgage applicants. According to Fannie Mae, if a renter misses a payment, they are automatically unenrolled from the software so that it does not damage their credit score; landlords, however, are allowed to report missed rent payments to credit agencies on their own. The program is expected to have a significant impact on cities with high renter populations and on groups that often have difficulty establishing credit.

There are a number of agencies in Milwaukee that offer first-time home-buyer resources, including explanation of the homebuying process, your rights to fair housing and tips to avoid predatory lenders.

[Acts Housing](#): 414-933-2215, 2414 W Vliet St., Milwaukee, WI 53205

[Housing Resources Inc.](#): 414-461-6330, 830 W Burleigh St., Milwaukee, WI 53222

[Take Root Milwaukee](#): 414-921-4149, 1915 N. King Drive, Milwaukee, WI 53212

[Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council](#): 414-278-1240, 759 N Milwaukee St #500, Milwaukee, WI 53202

**Food/hunger:** Tom Jozwik reported that the U.S. Senate hosted [“A Catholic Approach to Hunger, Nutrition and the Farm Bill”](#) on Sept. 21. Representatives of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities USA were panelists.

The Bishops Conference representative said in the meeting that the USCCB cares about hunger, which means caring about SNAP. The USCCB has asked that Congress strengthen SNAP. As food is a basic need and human right, farming is not just another economic activity but a way of life—and policy should ensure a decent life for farmers and farm workers. Policy should also sustain and strengthen rural communities, encourage diversity in farm ownership and protect God’s creation.

The Catholic Relief Services speaker said an estimated 1,000 people die hourly in the world from hunger-related causes. Afghanistan is experiencing the worst drought in memory. Famine is anticipated in East Africa. Ethiopia has suffered due to delayed rainfall. The CRS panelist praised the Food for Peace program, which she said is “just a sliver” of Farm Bill funding yet has been “transformational,” making “a profound impact” in places such as Madagascar. “We urge Congress not go forget those around the world,” the panelist said.

Sara Lindsay, representing Catholic Charities USA ([CCUSA](#)), mentioned SNAP in a positive light. She and other participants contended that problems’ solutions require community collaboration—public and private agencies working together rather than competing. USDA funding apparently helps Catholic Charities offer mobile and home food deliveries and emergency financial assistance. CCUSA is urging Congress to pass the Child Nutrition Authorization Bill. And panelist Lindsay made a point in which we all might find consolation at those times our Vincentian efforts seem almost futile: “Every dent we make in alleviating suffering for another human being DOES matter.”

Tom also followed up on the Sept. 28 White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health, featured speaker President Biden told the assembly that, “in America, no child should go to bed hungry.” More than \$8 billion has been pledged by the public and private sectors toward the Conference goal of decreasing diet-related diseases and putting an end to hunger by 2030. At least \$2.5 million will be earmarked for start-up companies finding solutions to hunger and food insecurity. Major food chains and thousands of restaurants have committed to a “Kids Live Well” program geared to creating healthier meal choices for children. And one business with a local presence, the Meijer corporation is offering discounts to SNAP customers for food purchases. In a follow up report on the event in [Health Affairs](#), the leading health policy research publication, William H. Dietz stated that the atmosphere at the White House Conference was “celebratory,” with standing ovations accorded to the mention of the need to expand SNAP, institute universal free school meals and restore the expanded child tax credit. “The challenge moving forward is how to translate the enthusiasm of the day into continued actions for the future,” cautioned Dietz. One attempt to “translate the enthusiasm” occurred in October, when a bill was introduced in the California legislature calling for free breakfast and lunch for all California students (and elimination of the lengthy application process that’s been required for students to receive such meals). California is the first state in the nation to propose such a bill.

On a sidenote to hunger; Chairperson Busch asked Dick Fedler from the Hands of Christ Conference that serves the southside [SVDP meals site](#), if he knew whether or not the kitchens had begun serving meals in person once again. Fedler reported that we are indeed serving meals inside at the southside kitchen, but that decision is dependent on having enough volunteers available to manage the serving line. On many nights they simply don't have enough people available to serve so hand out or box meals are the rule on those days. Dick also stated that he believes the northside site is not yet able to serve sit-down meals. Armand Carriere added that he has been at the northside site recently and confirmed that they are still serving only carry-outs. And Armand felt that the lack of volunteers is really killing the program.

**Immigration:** Armand Carriere updated us on the [status of DACA](#). A federal appeals court judge ruled recently that the current version of the federal policy that prevents the deportation of hundreds of immigrants brought to this country as children can continue, pending further action. There can be no new DACA applications while this is being reviewed but current DACA individuals can remain in the country. The issue will still have to be dealt with legislatively. The DACA population includes nearly 600,000 active recipients and over 80,000 first-time applicants waiting to be processed. There are currently a number of bills pending in the Congress that would provide permanent relief to the Dreamers.

Last June, the U.S. observed ten years since the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was created through executive action. This program has given hope to many Dreamers, and DACA recipients have gained well-deserved reputations as high academic achievers, community leaders, and contributors to the American economy. Nevertheless, DACA recipients continue to lack access to permanent legal status, and their future in the United States remains uncertain.

Carriere also reported that [Refugee housing](#) has become a significant problem in Milwaukee. The arrival of Afghan refugees starting about a year ago, plus refugees from Myanmar and the Republic of Congo, has put a strain on agencies seeking housing for the immigrants. The problem is complicated by a tight rental housing market in Milwaukee. Typical rents have gone from an average of \$635 per month to approximately \$913 per month. Apartment size can also be a problem. The typical immigrant large and/or extended families require something more than a one or two bedroom apartment and finding affordable housing to meet that need frequently means housing in less than desirable neighborhoods. Sympathetic landlords who have rented to immigrants find them to be good tenants. These landlords encourage other owners of rental properties to consider renting to immigrants. Anyone with information regarding rental opportunities is encouraged to contact the International Institute of Wisconsin, Lutheran Social Services, or Hanan Refugee Relief Group.

On a related note, Armand asked the group about how their Conferences handle rent assistance, and mentioned that his Conference does not help with rent.

Busch responded that from the reports he has heard a regional SVDP meetings, about as many Conferences help with rent as those that do not supply rent assistance. Most of those that help with rent try to contact the landlords and make certain that they are willing to keep the tenant in the property and not start an eviction. IF the landlord is receptive to putting the tenant on a payment plan, than the Conference will put up some of the past due rent, while getting the tenant to come up with some of the funds on their own. Fond du Lac Council President Michael Breszee commented that in the Fond du lac Council, rent assistance is the number one way that they help people. Conferences have to keep a low cap on rent assistance payments because they typically get 40 requests per week for rent help, amounting to around 200 thousand dollars per year! Mike also stated that recent increases in rent is probably the leading cause for homelessness in their area.

**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 at: [dabusch99@yahoo.com](mailto:dabusch99@yahoo.com)

Michael Breszee commented that in Fond du Lac, Interstate Highway 41 is becoming a leading corridor for human trafficking. Most hotels and motels along the highway from Fond du Lac to north of Appleton, are reporting increased incidents of sex trafficking this year.

John Weber stated that through his work with the Franciscan Peacemakers, he knows that hotel and motel staff members in his area have gotten some training in how to spot the signs of human trafficking. Breszee replied that unfortunately in his area of the state, some of the hotel and motel workers are part of the problem. The conferences have heard back from people that they have placed into a hotel or motel for a few nights have reported that they had been offered a few more night's stay from the desk clerks or managers, in exchange for sexual favors.

**Labor/Minimum Wage** – Dave Busch reported that Wisconsin's unemployment rate held steady in September at 3.2 percent, compared to the US unemployment rate of 3.5 percent. But unemployment in southeastern Wisconsin remains high. According to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development ([DWD](#)), Milwaukee County's rate was at 4.3 percent, Kenosha County at 3.5 percent, Racine County's rate at 3.8 percent,

The data also shows that Wisconsin counties having the highest concentration of Native Americans, also have unemployment rates that are currently at 5 percent or higher, with Menomonee County leading the state with an unemployment rate of 5.9 percent.

Michael Breszee added that although Menomonee County has the highest rate of unemployment in Wisconsin, their current rate is one of the lowest rates they have had.

**Waukesha Update:** David Anderson had some difficulty connecting to our Zoom meeting and was unable to attend. Discussion on this topic was tabled until the next meeting.

**Racine Update:** Jim Erven reported that the new Racine Thrift Store has been operating successfully for a few months now. Located at 2118 Rapids Drive in Racine, the store is now open six days per week and is accepting donations during normal business hours Monday thru Saturday. You can contact the store by phone at: 262-583-0177.

The Racine County Council in October donated five thousand dollars to the National [Friends of the Poor Grant Program](#), which assists other Councils and Conferences that may be in higher need of resources due to the challenges posed by higher numbers of people in need or in highly distressed communities. The Racine Council sees that profits from having opened a second Thrift Store has resulted in surplus funds that they believe will allow them to continue donating funds to the FOP Grant Fund in the future. Jim also reported that his conference has started a twinning relationship with St. Veronica's Conference in Milwaukee. St. Veronica's Conference is helping to cover areas in the city that do not have a SVDP Conference in their parish. They report on a recent increase in need for help with appliances because many landlords have stopped furnishing any appliances to renters. Dick Fedler added that home appliances are the number one expense at the Hands of Christ Conference that serves the southeast side of Milwaukee.

Erven also told us about the [Sleep in Heavenly Peace](#) project in the Racine-Kenosha area. They are a group of volunteers dedicated to building, assembling and delivering top-notch bunk beds to children and families in need. They have invited Racine Vincentians to help them build and deliver beds in their area. Mike Breszee added that the organization is national, all voluntary, and they have a chapter in the Fond du Lac area as well.

### **Old Business:**

**SVDP Awareness Month** – Dave Busch reported on the special mass for Vincentians held at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Milwaukee, on Sunday September 25<sup>th</sup>, at 9 AM. Vincentian and Deacon Rich Gulig assisted Bishop Jeffrey Haines with this mass. A reception with coffee and donuts was held after the mass, with Bishop Haines in attendance along with approximately 45 Vincentians. VOP Chair Dave Busch made an informal poll of the Vincentians in attendance and he reports that more than half of the people he questioned had reported that their Conference had, or was planning to participate in one or more SVDP Awareness Month activities.

### **New Business:**

**Social Security and the Poor** – Recent [statements](#) by Wis. Sen. Ron Johnson have again put the future of Social Security into the public spotlight. Senator Johnson has suggested that Social Security and Medicare be eliminated as federal entitlement programs, and that they should instead become programs approved by Congress on an annual basis as discretionary spending. Johnson's statement that he would like to revoke the guarantee of Medicare and Social Security and make them discretionary would fundamentally change the guarantee of the largest anti-poverty program in the country and, considering the very narrow margin in the majority status of the new congress, would very likely subject these benefits to partisan infighting in Washington. Busch asked for help from the VOP members to consider helping investigate how these changes might affect the poor.

**Justice for Immigrants** - Last March, the House of Representatives passed [the American Dream and Promise Act](#) with broad bipartisan support. The Senate failed to take up the bill, and if it does not do so by the time the 117th Congress ends on January 3, 2023, the bill will have to be reintroduced and the process begun all over again in the 118th Congress. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops issued an [Action Alert](#) calling for Catholics to contact their representatives in Washington D.C. and urge Congress to move forward with creating a pathway to permanent legal status for Dreamers today. Armand Carriere's report on Immigration, directly connected a recent Federal Appeals Court ruling on DACA to the USCCB's efforts to pass a bill on a pathway to citizenship.

**Mental Health Care for the Poor** – Members of the SVDP Archdiocesan Board, at their October meeting asked that the VOP take a look into the problems of obtaining mental health services for those in need. We will discuss the best way to proceed on this topic at our next VOP meeting.

**Next Meeting:** The next VOP meeting will be held online, on the second Saturday in December. Please plan to join us on Saturday, December 10, 2022 at 9AM. The login information can be found on the last page of these minutes.

**Adjournment:** The meeting was formally adjourned at 10:51 AM, with the VOP members reading a closing prayer for all those in public office.

*“ We pray for all those in authority in our community, for every leader of our nation, that you would give them Your wisdom and discernment as they lead.”*

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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=WFN2NIhkV1c1SVpqd2l1RG5oVklyUT09>

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

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

Meeting ID: 844 3596 9715