



St. Vincent de Paul Society Milwaukee Archdiocese

Voice Of the Poor Committee

Minutes from the Meeting held on December 9, 2023

In Attendance: David Anderson, Randy Bedore, Dave Busch, Armand Carriere, Jim Erven, Richard Fedler, Tom Jozwik, John Weber, and SVDP President Mike Farrell

Call to Order: As the Zoom meeting opened there was some general conversation about what some conferences were doing extra during the Christmas season. John Ehlers mentioned that his Conference at Mother of Perpetual Help has been putting together gift baskets and making visits to the elderly that are home bound in their parish. Tom Jozwik reported that St. Sebastian's Conference was teaming up with St. Catherines of Alexandria to help with home visits on the north side of Milwaukee. Jim Erven reported that in Racine, home visits are up as membership is going down. Armand Carriere stated that his St. Monica's Conference has seen an increase in home visits in north-central Milwaukee, outside of their parish neighborhood. The VOP meeting was formally called to order at 9:05 AM with all members praying together, the short version of the opening prayer for St. Vincent de Paul Society meetings.

Minutes: The minutes from the VOP meeting held on November 11, 2023 were sent to the VOP members in advance of this meeting and the November VOP minutes were accepted by general consent. HOWEVER, following the December meeting, one error was discovered; in the original VOP Minutes 11-11-23, the headline still read "Meeting held on October 14". The header was changed to read November 11, and a few other minor typographical errors were corrected. A **revised** copy of the Minutes (Rev. 02) was sent to the VOP members on December 14th, 2023.

Subcommittee Updates:

Energy – Dave Busch reported that WE Energies rate increase request was approved by the Public Service Commission on November 21st, and will go into effect Jan. 1, 2024.

The [PSC](#) authorized a 2.5% increase in customers' bills, on top of the double-digit increase We Energies homeowners and renters saw at the beginning of 2023. Taken together, residential customers' electricity bills in 2024 will be up about 14% from 2022.

The PSC trimmed the utility's request in some areas, but an increase in the projected cost of coal for 2024 offset some of those reductions. As a result, the PSC authorized an increase of \$82 million, \$2 million below the utility's request.

In this year's case, [CUB](#)'s regulatory team highlighted the need for greater analysis and scrutiny of costs in several areas, including the potential savings when coal plants shut down, overruns on solar projects, and the We Energies storm hardening program, and a reduction in the utility's Return On Equity ([ROE](#)). WE Energies issued a statement that said in part some consumers will actually see a reduction in their energy bills this winter, thanks to a reduction in the price of natural gas. This Spring, We Energies is expected to apply for another rate increase for 2025-26.

Criminal Justice - E. Michael McCann was not able to attend this meeting so the report on criminal justice was tabled until next month.

Related Topic - Randy Bedore had wanted to pose a question to Mike McCann regarding the new SVDP [Safeguarding](#) policy. Randy stated the McCann had reported at a recent SVDP Board meeting that Safeguarding policy will be strict on who can make home visits. Randy stated that many Conferences will find this discouraging and it may make it more difficult to make deliveries to neighbors in need. VOP Chair Dave Busch stated the he thought that McCann had stated that there will be very few exceptions to Safeguarding policies. One example given at the Board meeting was, if a Vincentian is dropping off a voucher, or food, or a grocery gift card and has only short contact with the person in need, the Vincentian must have gone through the Safeguarding training and background check, but the second person on the visit, if they have no direct contact with the person in need, may not need to have been screened. However, SVDP President Mike Farrell stated that the SVDP training program must be adhered to by all Vincentians. The days of one person dropping off food on a porch might be gone. Further, all home visits will require two Safeguard screened volunteers. In addition, all SVDP Thrift Store employees and volunteers, along with all meal site volunteers, will be required to have Safeguarding background checks.

Needy Conference Fund - Farrell also took the opportunity to announce that at that recent SVDP Board meeting, the Board approved additional funds be made available to the Needy Conference Fund. If your Conference has more requests than resources, you can apply to the Needy Conference Fund for additional help. Contact SVDP Finance Director Michelle Martin mmartin@svdpmilw.org for more information.

Housing: John Weber reported that problems with the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee ([HACM](#)) seem to keep rolling on, but they *have* moved forward with a new chief of security. HACM has a new Chief of Public Safety. Marlon E. Davis growing up in the Westlawn public housing community and has 26 years of service with the Milwaukee Police Department. He brings a knowledgeable, compassionate perspective to this challenging role.

Chief Davis provided an update on his first 60 days to the county board members. He will be meeting regularly with team members, residents, partners and other stakeholders in County housing, to develop and implement effective safety strategies.

The Public Safety department is responsible for safety and security of over 5,000 households in 22 housing developments and 371 scattered home sites across the 100 square miles of the city of Milwaukee. When fully staffed, the team consists of 18 full-time employees who cover 3 shifts 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls for service includes emergency and after-hours maintenance, pull alarms, residential disputes and other non-emergency situations that do not require an immediate law enforcement response.

In a related story, Weber reports that the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development ([HUD](#)) has awarded Milwaukee County \$1.8 million for affordable housing services.

This funding is set up to help expand housing options for families with children using housing vouchers under the [Housing Choice Voucher](#) program, with a goal of increasing access to neighborhoods with high-performing schools, access to employment, low crime rates, and parks. The focus will be to direct funds to housing mobility-related services, as well as the administering of the programs.

Weber also reported that out-of-state landlords are losing millions after city buying spree.

Since 2019 Dallas based [VineBrook Homes](#) bought more than 1,000 single family homes in Milwaukee. Nearly one in five of all Milwaukee rental homes has an out-of-state landlord .

VineBrook is under financial strain. In the first nine months of this year, the company lost 213.7 million dollars.

This year, VineBrook also sold off about 1,500 of its approximately 25,000 homes nationwide, including more than 200 homes in the Milwaukee market.

“They’re killing blocks one by one and forcing the good people out of Milwaukee” said Alderman Lamont Westmoreland whose district includes dozens of VineBrook homes.

Lastly, Weber updated us on a list of warming shelters for the homeless in Milwaukee:

Greater Galilee Baptist Church, 2432 N. Teutonia Ave. 414-562-1110

Repairs of the Breach, 1335 W. Vliet St. 414-934-9305

Guest House Milwaukee, 1216 N. 13th St. 414-345-3240

Milwaukee Rescue Mission, 830 N. 19th St. 414-344-2211

Milwaukee County’s Hillview, 1615 S. 22nd. St. 414-615-1350

[Milwaukee Warming Centers](#) operate overnight, from 7 pm until 7 am.

Hunger/FoodShare: Tom Jozwik reported on the [Produce to the People](#) food program. The program gave a 50% discount on fresh produce from Outpost Natural Foods, to SNAP recipients. Many seniors reportedly relied on the several-year-old program connected with Hunger Task Force ([HTF](#)). The program's most recent proposal for federal funds was denied; the HTF chief executive officer has suggested that concerned individuals contact their legislators and urge their help in reinstating Produce to the People.

HTF has a [Mobile Market](#)—an active store, not a food pantry or donation center—that visits underserved communities throughout Milwaukee County Mondays through Fridays. Sites interested in having a Mobile Market visit can contact rick@hungertaskforce.org for further information. HTF FoodShare Outreach staff will also help eligible persons apply for FoodShare during Market operating hours. The Market accepts credit cards, debit cards and Quest EBT—no cash.

Jozwik also reported on coming across some sobering statistics attributable to [Marquette University](#). As of the current year, some 147,000 people in Milwaukee County are food insecure—at 15.4%, the second-highest food insecurity rate in the state (behind only Menominee County at just over 17%). The statewide rate is 10%, somewhat better than the national rate of 12.5%.

David Anderson wanted to report that Grebe’s bakery is looking for some community group that can pick-up surplus bakery items on a daily basis, and distribute them to community homeless groups. They currently throw away dozens of donuts each day. Contact Alan Lett at 414-403-5097 if you can help.

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.

Immigration: Armand Carriere reported that locally, the Marquette University [Lubar Center](#) for Public Policy Research and Civic Education did a 2-part series in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel highlighting the immigrant experience in Milwaukee, in particular the work of churches in helping immigrants settle into a new country. The [first article](#) highlighted the work of Rev. Kasongo Gui Kabeo who is based at Benediction Lutheran Church on Milwaukee’s northwest side. While the church has become an anchor for the growing African community in Milwaukee, it also offers services in English, German, and Hmong.

Benediction Lutheran Church recognized it’s traditional membership was declining since the 1970’s. The church introduced its Hmong ministry in 2003 and its African ministry in 2006.

The Lubar study came away with two broad takeaways regarding immigration in Milwaukee:

- 1) While immigrants from Latin American and Mexico in particular, are the primary source of immigrants, many new immigrants are coming from all over the world; and
- 2) With declining birthrates and more people moving out of the city, international immigration is the main hope for growth in the city. A shrinking population would have serious implications for this region's economy. The work of Rev. Kabeo and the Hmong ministers have made great strides in helping newly arrived immigrants ready themselves for contributions to the growth of the economy in Milwaukee.

The [second article in the series](#) described the journey of a young man from Nicaragua to Milwaukee who found a refuge at St Patrick's parish on the city's southside. Like other old Milwaukee neighborhood parishes, St Patrick's served an earlier immigrant population – the Irish. Under the direction of Fr. Timothy Manatt, a Jesuit priest, the parish is now ministering to a largely Hispanic congregation and Fr. Manatt is serving as mentor to the young man from Nicaragua. Armand also reported that bipartisan support in the Wisconsin Legislature has surfaced that would expand access to education and employment for people currently enrolled in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. [Assembly Bill 822](#) would allow DACA recipients to obtain state-issued professional licenses and qualify for in-state tuition to attend UW system schools. There are currently approximately 5,800 DACA recipients living in Wisconsin. The [Wisconsin Catholic Bishops](#) are in support of this bill and Armand will follow the progress of this proposed legislation.

Mental Health Care – Sister Julie Krahl was unable to attend this meeting so a discussion on this topic was tabled until our next meeting.

John Weber reported that he has contacted [NAMI](#) in Milwaukee to ask them about speaking to our group during one of our ZOOM meetings, and they have replied that they are indeed interested in helping us.

Minimum Wage/Labor – Dave Busch reported that no minimum wage bills have yet been read into the current session of the Wisconsin legislature. It now seems unlikely that a new minimum wage proposal will be introduced in the current session. Because many people are still laboring for poverty level wages, they cannot keep pace with inflation and are losing more ground in our society. And although they have full time jobs they are not gainfully employed, making the need for a higher minimum, all the more important.

Next Busch reported that Wisconsin's [unemployment rate for October](#) 2023 is up for the second straight month.

Wisconsin's unemployment rate was 3.2% in October, up from 3.1% in September and mirroring the 0.1% increase in the national unemployment rate, which was 3.9% in October compared to 3.8% the previous month. The number of unemployed people increased 5,400 over the month and increased by 8,500 over the year to 102,000, yet still remaining at near record lows.

Racine Update: Jim Erven opened his report stating that it is business as usual for the Racine Council, and that he mentioned some of their current programs during our opening remarks. Erven explained that in the interest of brevity he wanted to report only on a few bills that are currently in the Wisconsin legislature that might benefit the poor. Two bills that are Medicaid related and one bill that deals with unhoused people. The first bill, [AB745/SB716](#) changes the family income eligibility level to up to 133 percent of the federal poverty line for parents and caretaker relatives under BadgerCare Plus and for childless adults currently covered under BadgerCare Plus Core. Under current law, certain parents and caretaker relatives with incomes of not more than 100 percent of the federal poverty line, are eligible for BadgerCare Plus benefits.

Next Erven told us about [AB748/SB719](#), a proposal to eliminate co-pay on prescription drugs for people in need. Under current law, certain persons who receive health services under the Medical Assistance program, also known in this state as BadgerCare, are required to contribute a cost-sharing payment to the cost of certain health services. This bill eliminates all cost-sharing payments for prescription drugs under the Medical Assistance program. The Medical Assistance program is a joint state and federal program that provides health services to individuals who have limited financial resources.

The third bill Erven told us about was [AB689/SB669](#), a proposal to establish performance based grant requirements and would also allow municipalities to establish structure camping facilities for the homeless. This bill establishes “pay for performance” requirements for certain grants issued under those programs, to grant recipients. For each eligible grant to a grant recipient, Department of Administration (DOA) must withhold between 10 and 50 percent of the amount of the eligible grant for at least six months after the award. DOA may then pay the amount withheld to the grant recipient only if the recipient demonstrates that it has met one or more performance objectives. This bill authorizes DOA and, cities, villages, towns, and counties (political subdivisions) to designate public property, other than county fairgrounds and public parks, for use as a “structured camping facility” at which DOA may assign a homeless individual or family a specific location, for the purpose of allowing the individual or family to set up temporary residence at that facility. The interesting feature of this bill is that it allows municipalities to establish their own guidelines for temporary homeless camps, but it also allows the DOA to establish these camps under certain circumstances, even if there is local opposition to them.

Erven felt that each of these bills were worthy of further consideration by the VOP, statewide.

Waukesha Update: David Anderson reported that the Waukesha Council is sponsoring a new initiative, a SVDP Waukesha Financial Advisory Committee. This committee will provide guidance and oversight on financial matters to assist the Waukesha council board in fulfilling their fiduciary responsibilities. The committee will advise in the areas of budgeting, financial reporting and analysis, internal controls and risk management, investment and asset management, compliance and legal oversight, and Board education. They are looking for five or six committee members. If you have experience which fits with this committees work, and are interested in learning more about it, and possibly serving on this committee, please email Carroll Mauer, cmaurer@wi.rr.com Next, Anderson mentioned that the Waukesha Getting Ahead class will be holding graduation for another group of about 10 investigators, on December 12th at 6 PM. Another class will begin in February. Conferences are asked to supply a meal for the participants, for at least one of the multiple class meetings to help defray some of the costs of this program. Dave Busch asked if Anderson could get the director of the Getting Ahead program to speak to our group regarding the 16 week course. The Director is Jodie LaChapelle and Busch will try to contact her through the Waukesha central office.

Anderson also reported that the Waukesha thrift store will be closed for two weeks from Sunday, January 21 through Saturday, February 3, to replace the entire floor. There will be no access to the building during this time frame. The Oconomowoc and Pewaukee stores will be open as usual. Lastly, Anderson told us that the [Waukesha overflow shelter](#) is now open and will remain open until April. The overflow shelter is not a walk-in shelter. Homeless people need a referral from one of four organizations: Hebron housing services, Family Promises (families with children and single mothers), Salvation Army (single men), or the Women's Center.

Old Business:

VoterVoice Action Alert – In our November meeting a motion to launch our Expungement of Records VoterVoice campaign was carried and the VOP members unanimously agreed to launch the Action Alert. Busch suggested that it would be best to wait until after the holidays to launch our VoterVoice campaign, so that our message would not be lost among the clutter of holiday ads and emails. This month Busch reported that he had contacted SVDP State Coordinator Jim Penczykowski to confirm that we have approval from all diocese in Wisconsin. And that he would contact Barb Sella at the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) regarding her thoughts on an appropriate launch date.

Expanding the Regional VOP – Dave Busch followed up on the request from Michael J. Sylvester, the SVDP North Central Region VOP Chairperson to share our list of Milwaukee Archdiocese VOP members with the NCR. Busch reported that he had sent the list of our Committee members to Mr. Sylvester and that he responded graciously stating “you have quite a large group of VOP members. What a blessing!” He is correct! (And you can all now look forward to getting email from the SVDP NCR VOP)

New Business:

New VoterVoice Action Alert – Dave Busch again mentioned that there is a bill in the Wisconsin legislature now that could make mental health care more widely available in Wisconsin. [AB500/SB476](#) would remove the requirement for mental health care providers to maintain a physical address in Wisconsin and be licensed in Wisconsin in order to provide telehealth services, provided that they are licensed, certified, registered, or otherwise authorized to provide health care services in another state. Busch reminding us that this would be a good bill for us to support by issuing our second statewide VoterVoice Action Alert, and he will solicit the Milwaukee SVDP Archdiocesan Board for permission to do so.

Next Meeting: The next VOP meeting will be held online on the second Saturday in January. Please plan to join us on Saturday January 13, 2024 at 9 AM. The login information can be found at the bottom of the last page of these minutes.

Adjournment: The meeting wrapped up with a brief discussion about our past December in-person meetings and our impromptu Christmas parties. This conversation included asking Randy Bedore to give our regards to Rose Lue-Hing. David Anderson asked about getting us together in person in the conference room at the Milwaukee Hwy 100 Thrift Store. Busch replied that the store shares the conference room with the Congregational church located in the same building, which makes it more difficult for us to schedule a meeting. Busch then mentioned that the Milwaukee Council is about to open a new Thrift Store on the north side of the city at 76th Street at Bradley Road. Mike Farrell interjected that the new north side store is really making great progress. A new roof has been installed, the parking lot has been resurfaced, new signage is going up, new electrical and sewer work has been completed, and a walk-through for Vincentians is planned for the first Saturday in January.

The city has issued an occupancy permit and a soft opening is planned for the end of January and a Grand Opening is possible in February.

The meeting officially adjourned early, at 10:40 am with all VOP members praying together, a prayer for the Advent Season.

“God of power and mercy, open our hearts in welcome. Remove the things that hinder us from receiving Christ with joy...”

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MILWAUKEE ARCHDIOCESE VOICE OF THE 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's 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