



## Position Statement on Affordable Housing for the Poor

Recommendations by the Voice of the Poor Committee  
Council of the United States

### Message From Our President

Dear Brother and Sister Vincentians,  
As the largest Catholic lay organization in the United States, I commend the many Councils of the Society who provide affordable housing to our neighbors in need. I ask all Councils to respond likewise, as resources allow, to address the housing needs of people in your community. Furthermore, I urge all members of the Society to support Legislative efforts aimed at increasing housing opportunities for all people in need of a decent place to live. Sincere thanks to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Committees — Voice of the Poor and Housing for developing this Position Statement, which I endorse. May we go forth to meet these challenges following the examples of Vincent and Frederic.  
Yours in Christ,

FINAL-SIGNED BY PRESIDENT 7/19/02

Eugene Smith  
National President, Council of the United States

### **Situation**

Housing is an important concern of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. At each meeting Vincentians recite the opening prayer, which includes the hope "...that families and those who have no home may quickly find a place in which they can live a decent and happy life." Vincentians visit individuals and families with no homes, families on the verge of homelessness, and families who live in hazardous and substandard conditions.

The Rule of the Society reminds us of our mission. "No act of charity is foreign to the Society." Councils and Conferences, recognizing the need for safe and affordable housing, seek to provide emergency shelter, transitional housing, permanent housing, and rent/mortgage assistance.

### **Recommendation**

The Voice of the Poor Committee encourages the Society to speak in a unified voice in support of affordable housing locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. As members of the Society it is important to communicate the needs of the poor and encourage affordable housing policy that includes the following.

1. Society members must encourage the preservation and production of quality housing for low-income families, the elderly and other vulnerable people; as well as the participation and partnership of residents, nonprofit community groups and churches to build and preserve affordable housing. We must

encourage other churches, community groups, the private sector, and state and local government to do more to meet our common responsibility for housing.

2. The Society should work with other interested groups on affordable housing. When entering into collaborative arrangements, Councils must clearly understand what is entailed in their commitments with others, keep members informed, and have member support for the activities in which it is involved.

3. The Society should take advantage of opportunities to speak out in favor of increasing the number of rent subsidy programs, such as expanding Section 8 programs. There is no substitute for an involved, effective, and committed federal government. It is important that issues are researched before speaking out. Careful planning and preparation ensures success in communicating the message of the need for emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent housing for the poor. As individuals, members can utilize opportunities to share their personal stories and service with key decision makers. Members see first hand the needs of the poor, and as a voice united in solidarity with the poor, the Society can share the experiences of families and individuals whom we visit, while maintaining confidentiality. We can help to bring needs alive to others who might otherwise see only governmental reports showing numbers on pages rather than viewing real people with real needs.

Note: Only the National President is the official spokesperson for the Society in the United States. The same goes for local Councils. The duly elected Council President is the official spokesperson for local issues.

## **SVDP Working with Others**

Vincentians are involved in person-to-person assistance for it is in serving the poor that we find Jesus. In our work, we are continually challenged to act responsibly to that cry. Conferences are asked to help with deposits, rent and mortgage assistance. There is an ongoing need for emergency shelter, transitional housing and permanent housing. Councils often work to fill these larger needs through special works activities, which entail bringing in outside expertise from the community or working through collaborative efforts to establish shelter and housing programs. While permanent shelter is the ultimate goal, the need for emergency shelter and transitional housing takes precedence. It is in these settings that Councils work together with other faith based groups, government agencies, and community service providers in an effort to get individuals and families to the point where they can ultimately be successful in obtaining permanent housing. It must be understood that while collaboration is important, Councils are expected to follow the basic principles on which the Society was established.

“The Society realizes that it does not have expertise in all areas of need. Its members collaborate with organizations, agencies and people of good will in alleviating need. In all such collaborative relationships, the Society maintains its autonomy and a focus on the involvement of its members in person-to-person ministry.”

United States Manual of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, August 1995, p. 2-3

## **SVDP and the Public Sector**

While the Society is in support of federal, state and locally funded housing, the Society also recognizes the importance of maintaining its autonomy. As part of the Catholic Church, the Society upholds fundamental beliefs that may not be held in the same esteem by others, such as, the sanctity of life, who can serve on boards of the Society, who can and cannot be served, what religious symbols/services are permitted, types of information required (e.g. social security numbers, legal status), or the ability of the organization to meet and to decide what is in its best interests. It is essential that the Society, as part of the Catholic Church, remain independent and take care in deciding with whom to partner with. This is especially important when it comes to government contracting. Receiving government assistance and/or funding from other sources involves more than knowing when the money is available or where to find the application. It also involves understanding what strings are attached, and a host of requirements that must be met.

## **Special Works Activities and the Responsibility of Councils**

With increasing needs and limited resources, the power of collaborative efforts to problems of poverty and injustice cannot be underestimated. At the same time, when becoming involved in collaborative and cooperative activities, it is essential that Councils have a clear understanding of implications and expectations of such relationships. The following policy was established by the Trustees of the US Council.

1. Assets may not be given to individuals and/or non-St. Vincent de Paul groups.
2. If a special work of the Society is spun off to non-St. Vincent de Paul entities, every effort needs to be made to obtain the fair market value for assets.
3. If a special work of the Society is spun off to entities outside of the Society, the name of the Society can no longer be used to identify that project or used for the solicitation of funds and/or membership.
4. Mailing lists, membership rosters, information databases, service information, Society identity logos and slogans, and other such items are proprietary and the sole property of the Society. Such information cannot be given to or used by non-Vincentian entities that take on projects formerly operated by the Society.

“As advocates for and contributors to the common good, Catholic social service agencies and other voluntary social service providers deserve acceptance, support and respect from the public sector. Diversity of culture, values, and identities is widespread across this country and justifies providing different service models in different communities. The goal of serving a genuinely pluralistic society is best achieved by the participation of providers reflecting the diversity of our communities. In establishing partnerships with voluntary agencies, public sector authorities must not make requirements that weaken agency identities and integrity or undermine agency commitments to serve people in need. On the other hand, political entities that are primarily responsible for the common good should appropriately require accountability by Church-sponsored and other social agencies for standards of service and expenditures of public funds.”

## **The Catholic Church's Position on Housing**

The Catholic Church has long recognized housing as a basic human right. The bishops of the United States continue to address the issue of affordable housing. Three documents on affordable housing: *The Right to a Decent Home* (1975); *Housing: The Third Human Right* (1984); and *Homelessness and Housing: A Human Tragedy, a Moral Challenge* (1988) have been released by the US Bishops. These may be found in the collection of Pastoral Letters Vols. IV and V. The following information is from The United States Catholic Bishops, Office of Domestic Social Development, 3211 Fourth Street NE, Washington, D.C. 20017 (ph. 202-541-3185).

Catholic sponsored housing covers a diverse array of assistance including nonprofit housing for the poor, the elderly, and the disabled. It is estimated that more than 47,000 units provide housing for at least 67,000 people. Out of the 185 Dioceses in the US, an estimated 124 Dioceses report sponsoring more than 20,000 units, while 137 Religious Orders report sponsoring more than 13,000 units. Catholic Charities 51 agencies sponsor more than 12,000 units. Nearly 50% of the units are HUD supported, while nearly 40% of the operating budgets are government funded. Of the units approximately 90% serve low-income people, mostly the elderly and disabled. (The Society furnishes over 3,000 spaces for housing and is active in emergency shelters, transitional housing and permanent housing.)

The US Catholic Bishops recognize that it is not their role or their expertise to describe the specific policies and programs to meet the needs of homeless people or families that cannot afford adequate housing, yet they have stated that the major goals for a national housing policy should include the following.

### **Preservation**

Effective policies to help preserve, maintain, and improve what low-cost, decent housing is already existing;

### **Production**

Creative, cost-effective, and flexible programs that will increase the supply of quality housing for low-income families, the elderly and other vulnerable people.

### **Participation**

Encourage the active and sustained involvement and empowerment of the homeless, tenants, neighborhood residents, and housing consumers. We need to build on the American traditions of homeownership, self-help, and neighborhood participation.

### **Partnership**

Ongoing support for effective and creative partnerships among nonprofit community groups, churches, private developers, government at all levels, and financial institutions to build and preserve affordable housing.

### **Affordability**

Efforts to help families obtain decent housing at costs that do not require neglect of other basic necessities.

### **Opportunity**

Stronger efforts to combat discrimination in housing against racial and ethnic minorities, women, those with handicapping conditions, and families with children. Churches, community groups, the private sector, and state and local government must all do more to meet our common responsibility for housing. However, there is no substitute for an involved, competent, and committed federal government providing resources,



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## **10 Points for Economic Life by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops**

1. The economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy.
2. All economic life should be shaped by moral principles. Economic choices and institutions must be judged by how they protect or undermine the life and dignity of the human person, support the family, and serve the common good.
3. **A fundamental moral measure of any economy is how the poor and vulnerable are faring.**
4. **All people have a right to life and to secure the basic necessities of life (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, safe environment, economic security.)**
5. All people have the right to economic initiative, to productive work, to just wages and benefits, to decent working conditions as well as to organize and join unions or other associations.
6. All people, to the extent they are able, have a corresponding duty to work, a responsibility to provide for the needs of their families and an obligation to contribute to the broader society.
7. In economic life, free markets have both clear advantages and limits; government has essential responsibilities and limitations; voluntary groups have irreplaceable roles, but cannot substitute for the proper working of the market and the just policies of the state.
8. **Society has a moral obligation, including governmental action where necessary, to assure opportunity, meet basic human needs, and pursue justice in economic life.**
9. Workers, owners, managers, stockholders and consumers are moral agents in economic life. By our choices, initiative, creativity and investment, we enhance or diminish economic opportunity, community life, and social justice.
10. The global economy has moral dimensions and human consequences. Decisions on investment, trade, aid and development should protect human life and promote human rights, especially for those most in need wherever they might live on this globe.