VOICE OF THE POOR
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q. How does the Voice of the Poor fit in with the mission of the Society?

As Catholics and members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, we see the face of Jesus in those we visit. We have a responsibility to be a "Voice of the Poor (VOP)," and to speak out for those who have no voice.

> "I was hungry and you gave me to eat.
> I was thirsty and you gave me to drink.
> I was in prison and you visited me."

An important part of that mission is to bring the stories of the people we visit into the public spotlight. No other charity or social service agency visits people in their homes, listens to their stories, and offers such compassionate hope and aid. This puts us in a unique position to inform our elected representatives and our community how decisions affect the people for whom we care. In particular, we want to hold our elected representatives accountable for the decisions that they make that affect the poor.

Part VII of the International Rule of the Society, "Relationship with Civil Society, Work for Social Justice," calls Vincentians to address injustice as part of their mission of service to the poor. Excerpts from Part VII (April, 2005):

7.1 The Society gives immediate help but also seeks mid-term and long-term solutions.

…In all its charitable actions there should be a search for justice; in its struggle for justice, the Society must keep in mind the demands of charity.

7.4 The practical Vincentian approach to social justice

The distinctive approach of Vincentians to issues of social justice is to see them from the perspective of those we visit who suffer from injustice.

7.5 A voice for the voiceless

The Society helps the poor and disadvantaged speak for themselves. When they cannot, the Society must speak on behalf of those who are ignored.

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7.6 Facing the structures of sin

Where injustice, inequality, poverty or exclusion are due to unjust economic, political or social structure or to inadequate or unjust legislation, the Society should speak our clearly against the situation, always with charity, with the aim of contributing to and demanding improvements.

7.8 Political independence of the Society

The Society does not identify with any political party and always adopts a nonviolent approach….

Q. What are the main goals of Voice of the Poor?

Our main goals are:

1. Creating awareness and generating interest amongst Vincentians.
2. Encouraging members to speak in one unified voice as an extension of our service to the individuals and families served by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. We have stories to tell about our service, the individuals and families we serve, and compelling statistics about the numbers of people in need that we assist
3. Advocate at the local, state and national level with key decision makers and lawmakers to bring about systemic change — in other words, to work for change that makes a lasting difference in the systems, institutions and people that create and sustain poverty and need.

We need to build grassroots support by having one person designated as a Voice of the Poor Conference Contact in every conference in the US.

We can be effective by bringing the stories of those we serve poor to life, by recasting their stories so that those in our pews and our communities know that these are more than statistics.

Q. With sharp political differences how do we remain unified as Vincentians?

When Frédéric Ozanam and his friends formed the first Conference, they agreed not to discuss partisan politics. We are not speaking as Democrats, Republicans, or as the member of any political party. We speak as Catholics, whose teaching states that we must consider the needs of those less fortunate when forming our conscience. Catholic Social Teaching , including the US Bishops document "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" , as well as our Society of St. Vincent de Paul are clear in those teachings

Q. How is the Voice of the Poor organized?

The national committee has representatives from each of our eight regions allowing for regional communications. Councils are encouraged to each form a Voice of the Poor Committee so that we can begin to develop a network.

Q. If I am a member of a political party, can I get involved in Voice of the Poor?

You don't have to give up your political tenets when you become a member of Voice of the Poor. We are about finding common ground for solutions, including political solutions, to those programs or institutions that create or keep people living in poverty. We advocate for issues, not candidates.

Q. Isn't it illegal for the Society or me as a Vincentian to lobby for or against legislation? Couldn't we lose our non-profit status with the IRS?

The law provides that charitable organizations can engage in lobbying. In fact, the general experience for many organizations is that they have increased their impact by carefully undertaking lobbying activities. We are not permitted by law to engage in electioneering — in other words, getting involved in supporting or opposing a particular political candidate. Get-out-the-vote and voter education campaigns, including education about a specific issue, are not, by law, considered electioneering. Lobbying policymakers is just one aspect of political or social involvement. Another is advocacy, which means simply arguing in favor of a particular cause or action. Not-for-profit organizations by their very existence are advocates for something specific, such as the arts, the environment, education, justice, transportation, poverty, and so forth. When you read our mission, it is clear that we have a responsibility to advocate for those we serve and to alleviate the root causes of poverty. We do this most effectively and in an organized way through our Voice of the Poor committees at the national and local levels.

Q. How can I get involved and committed to Voice of the Poor?

See the document: Starting a Voice of the Poor Committee