

Voice of the Poor Advocacy Guide

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Advocating for Christ's Poor – Our Vincentian voice does make a difference

You may be wondering if the Society's involvement in the political process is worth the effort. What can we really accomplish? Will phone calls, letters or visits to elected officials have an influence? We believe our Vincentian voice can make a difference.

Elected officials in Washington, D.C., in our state capitols, and in our city and county governments are there because of voters like us. Their central focus is to respond to voter concerns, and they need to hear from us. The more interest generated by constituents, the more likely they will respond!

As members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVDP), we have a voice and an identity, and we are part of a larger faith-based community -- the Catholic Church. Members are homeowners, parents, business owners, and taxpayers who live in the neighborhoods that elected officials represent.

The National Voice of the Poor Committee is involved in identifying opportunities and challenges in legislative and regulatory activity. Nationally SVDP through our elected national president builds effective alliances with other organizations and maintains a national presence with elected officials. But these national efforts are just a part of the equation. The real foundation of our advocacy is the thousands of Vincentians, in every part of the country, that will make a difference by speaking out together in one voice for those in need.

As Vincentians we know the power that comes from grassroots organizing. All we need to do is look to our Founder, Frederic Ozanam. That small band of students formed just over 165 years ago, today can count 875,000 members in 132 countries spanning five continents. There are 120,000 Active, Associate and Contributing members and approximately 4,464 Conferences in the United States.

Virtually every day they are in session, our elected representatives in Washington, D.C., in our state capitol, and in our city and county governments discuss legislation that affects those whom we serve. Care for the elderly, fair wages, child welfare, the sanctity of life, education, prison reform, nutrition programs, debt relief for third world countries -- all have an impact on the quality of life for many. By educating our representatives and sharing our stories, statistics, and service, we can make a critical and effective difference for those whom Christ has called us to serve.

"Lord help us seek and find the forgotten, the suffering, and the deprived so that we may bring them your love."

Prayer of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul

We Are Experts on the Issues

Our Voice of the Poor work has, as its goals, making the difficulties of those we serve more visible to our parishes and our communities. In that effort, we hope that the ultimate outcome is to change the laws and structures that make it difficult for people in need to reach self-sufficiency.

Our approach is to help others see our clients as we do—the face of Jesus among us. Ultimately, we are reminding others of the words from the Gospel of Matthew: “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”

We accomplish this by telling the stories of the people we see. Certainly, we are not trying to sensationalize our clients. Nor do we intend to disclose any personal information or details that are told to us in confidence.

Voice of the Poor is our opportunity to put a face to the statistics we all hear about every day. That ability, to talk about those in need as real people, not just numbers, makes us unique among all charities and service organizations. We are one of the few organizations that is invited into the homes of those in need. We listen to their stories and try to offer whatever comfort and solace that we can. Sometimes, that includes money. Always, it includes compassion. Those frequent encounters with people in times of trouble give us a unique view of the tipping points of poverty.

We are experts in the pitfalls that cause financial need. As Vincentians and as Catholics, we are compelled to act on that expertise.

Practical pointers when working elected officials and their staffs

- **Patience is important.** Laws take time. The U.S. Constitution was crafted so that it is not easy to create new laws – and that is to our advantage. Creating new legislation should be a careful, deliberative process so that everyone’s best interests are considered.
- **Make an effort to build relationships.** Remember the old saying, “You can win a battle but lose the war.” In every interaction with an elected official, a staff member, a potential ally, or a political adversary, that there will always be other issues and another day. In our democratic process, it’s never really over. Always be helpful and constructive. Look toward the future and never burn bridges.
- **Understand their needs.** Before every contact, try to visualize what they need to hear, what their point-of-view is likely to be, what their concerns might be regarding the subject to be brought up. Consider their schedule and what else is going on at

the time. This will help you prioritize your messages, relate on a personal level, and build a long-term, effective strategy for influencing their actions.

- **Votes count.** Never underestimate your power as a concerned, constituent. The entire political process was set up to serve voters, and you are exercising your right as a citizen. An elected official's term in office is limited. Each Representative must raise money and votes every two years. Each Senator must do this every six years.

Legislative Staff Who's Who

Establish good relationships with all staff members when contacting the offices of elected officials. Staff members are the gatekeepers. They provide access to the elected official and have significant influence on the legislator's schedule, priorities and positions. Staff titles can vary from office to office. Try to clarify titles along with responsibilities. Following is a list of customary titles with brief explanations to help describe the types of staff members found legislative offices.

Chief of Staff. The position is known as executive assistant or chief of staff. This person is often in charge of all office operations and usually is involved in most political and policy decisions.

Legislative Aide. The Legislative Aide focuses on specific policy issues, such as welfare or education. Duties include educating the elected official on current developments. Legislative Aides write speeches and position papers, which are given by the elected official. Congressional Senate offices have a team of several Legislative Aids, while the Representatives' offices generally have fewer.

Legislative Correspondent. The Legislative Correspondent answers letters and calls from constituents from the Senator or Representative's district.

Press Secretary. This person is the elected official's chief spokesperson to the media.

Receptionist. The first point of contact in a Legislative office.

Scheduler. The scheduler makes appointments, and in order to gain access to a Senator or Representative, while in Congress, you will often be referred to this person.

Specialists. These may include policy analysts, experts, and legal counselors, who focus on single issues, such as health care, education, or foreign policy. In addition to legislative staff, committee staffs also have various titles and responsibilities. To determine titles, names and roles, contact each committee directly

How to work with elected officials

Remember that elected officials are driven by their perceptions of what their voters want. These perceptions are influenced by a number of factors, such as:

- letters, e-mails, and phone calls received from constituents
- media coverage of events and issues
- meetings with constituents, lobbyists, and political allies who express their concerns and/or interest
- what is said at public forums, such as town meetings
- surveys of voters and other research conducted by staff members

For elected officials the reality is that “all politics is local” because that is where their voters are. **Local examples** have more meaning than national statistics. The involvement of **local people and organizations** will get the attention of the official more effectively than a contact in Washington. **Local voters, local newspapers and local TV stations** are far more important to an elected official than party leaders or political power brokers.

This is why it is important to line up members of the Society, leaders in our faith-based community, and the leaders of business and other organizations to speak on behalf of the poor. If members are involved in other leadership positions in the community (e.g. on another Board, a member of Rotary, a PTA officer, etc.) mention that along with your affiliation with SVDP. Include local information in every communication with your elected official.

Think visually. Visual images, such as, a simple photograph showing a need, a video clip, graph, or even a picture drawn by a needy child can capture a story more vividly than a page of text. Use visual images. Attach a photo to a letter. Include graphs in a town meeting handout or in a SVDP newsletter. Post a video clip on the Internet. Identify relevant anecdotes and personal stories then go the extra step and consider how to capture these stories visually.

Maintain the credibility of the Society. Identify and coordinate advocacy efforts at the District Council or Arch/Diocesan level. Focus on specific, relevant issues. It is important that what the Society provides to elected officials and their staffs is accurate and reliable. If elected officials find that they cannot completely trust information provided by the Society, then you, and all your SVDP colleagues are suspect. Do not let passion for the subject matter lead to exaggeration. Work together to make sure that the message is consistent. If asked a question and you don't know, then say so. Promise to get back with more information promptly, and follow through with that promise.

Research. Find out as much as possible about people you want to influence and their personal links to the Society and the needy. Make a connection through an elected official or staff member's personal or family experience such as with poverty, family sickness, or a

family member who is connected to the Society. By doing so you can make your message much more powerful and memorable. Identify these personal experiences. This can tap an emotional nerve and awaken a dormant source of strong support.

Knowledge and preparation is vital. Before making any contact with an elected official, be prepared to answer potential questions. If it relates to specific legislation, know where the bill stands (e.g. is it in committee, awaiting a floor vote, or in a conference committee). Remember that committees may meet to consider bills months before the bill is brought before open session.

Use the media to help carry the message. Daily and weekly newspapers, magazines, TV news, radio and TV talk shows -- all play an important role in convincing elected officials that a specific issue is on the public agenda. Be sure to clip letters-to-the-editor or editorials from newspapers that support your position or human-interest articles that focus on your issue. Then include these in the written information packet you leave behind after a meeting, or attach them to a letter. You can also mention a TV news story or radio talk show that examined your issue to show that it is of interest to a wide range of people. Make the point that the media coverage of the issue will help make the general voting population more interested, and that you can help them stay ahead of the issue.

Know your friends. In addition to recruiting Vincentians to get involved, it is important to establish as broad a base as possible by forming alliances with other groups on specific issues (refer to Chapter 9). Meet to identify areas of common ground and to enlist support in writing letters, making phone calls, sending e-mails and attending public meetings.

Be prepared for opposing viewpoints. Identify the organizations that can mobilize voters against your cause(s). Be prepared to refute their message points by carefully researching issues and validating information. Understand the types of factors that motivate your opposition. Point these out to legislators in a fair, open way.

Tips when telephoning your elected official

There are several reasons to call your representative's office, such as, to urge support of specific legislation, to schedule an appointment to meet, to comment on a recent public statement made regarding a specific issue, or to follow up on a request. While phone calls can be effective if an important vote is imminent, such calls do not have the staying power of a letter. Consider a phone call as a first step, that should be followed up with a more lasting means of contact. This provides guidelines that apply to most situations. (Note: Be sure to contact your Network Coordinator beforehand to ensure that you are complementing other SVDP efforts.)

Be clear about your objective. Know the purpose of your call and what exactly you wish to communicate before you begin. When making your phone call:

- Ask to speak to the staff member in charge of the specific policy/issue that you are calling about. (Try to obtain the person's name in advance of the call. That way you can ask for the person by name.)
- Briefly introduce yourself. **Make sure to identify yourself as a SVDP member, and as a voting constituent. Give your credentials and the name of your St. Vincent de Paul Council.**
- State the purpose of your call concisely. (To comment on a recent public statement, to urge support of specific legislation, to make an appointment, etc.) Be sure to have the key message points prepared in advance, which outline the issues.
- If you are not requesting an appointment, be clear about where you stand on the issue, and ask that the official support your side. Thank the person for their time. If possible and appropriate, follow up with a letter reiterating your position and thanking the official for his/her time to speak with you. Include a flyer on the work of the Society with the letter.
- The following is a script that provides an example of what to say when talking with a policy staff member, once the receptionist connects you. This script is only a sample. It may be adapted it to your own speaking style and situation. It is important to be brief when explaining your perspective. It is also important to determine the legislator's current position on the issue and respond accordingly. To close, provide a concise summary that asks specifically for support on the issue, or that requests a meeting.

Sample Telephone Script to Schedule a Meeting

Hello, my name is _____, and I am (a member/president/chairman of ... District or Arch/Diocesan Council from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. We serve the needy in (type of setting), I am also a member of (_____) and (_____).

As an active member of the Society involved in legislative affairs, I would like the chance to talk with you about several pressing issues relating to (_____). I have some important information to provide on _____, and I would also like to update you on our service to the poor and to answer any questions you may have. I would like to come to your office and meet at your earliest convenience to introduce myself and provide a short briefing on (issue). I think about 15 minutes would be needed.

Thank you very much for your time. I look forward to meeting you and (name of elected official)

Visiting your elected official

- Once your visit is scheduled, confirm the appointment (date, place, time) with a telephone call before you leave for the visit. Make sure you are registered to vote before the meeting. If you have voted for the official, let him/her know that as well. Research the elected official's background. Know in advance his/her committee assignments, voting record, past stand on issues. Prepare a list of key points you want to make during the meeting. Plan to be brief. Expect the meeting to last only about fifteen minutes.
- Bring handouts that are factual, easy to read and understood. Think through the political and legislative impact of the issue and anticipate most questions. When it comes to questions you cannot answer, do not make educated guesses; instead tell the staff you do not know but will get back to them, and then get the correct answer and follow up promptly.
- Be direct. Ask if they support your issue. You want a direct answer so that you can determine what you need to do to follow up. If you receive a negative response, do not argue. Rather try to determine the reason(s) for the opposition and what is needed to change their minds. Offer to be a resource of information on related issues in the future.
- Elected officials represent you and want to know your concerns. Follow up the meeting with a thank you note. A sample "thank you" letter follows. You can E-mail a brief thanks immediately, and also send a written letter to create a double impression.

Sample "Thank You" Letter for Meeting with Elected Official

Dear Senator/Representative _____:

Thank you so much for the time you and (name of staff members attending) devoted to meeting with my colleagues and me. We were pleased to have the chance to inform you about (issue and its importance.)

As members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society we are committed to improving the well being of the needy in American, and we hope you will support us in that effort by supporting (brief re-statement of issue).

(Make reference to any additional information or contacts you are providing with this letter.)

If you or any member of your staff has any questions on (the issue,) please contact me.

Sincerely,

Tips for writing to elected officials

Do not underestimate the power of a letter. The written word can be a powerful influence on elected officials, and they have measurable value. Letters are tangible. Letters can be quoted. Letters last, unlike a fleeting verbal statement. Letter writing can be a strong and efficient way to be heard. In today's computer driven world, E-mail letters may be counted

Senator

The Honorable (Full name) U.S. Senate Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator (Last name):

Time Activity

8:00

Welcome

Representative

The Honorable (Full name) U.S. House of Representatives Washington D.C. 20515

Dear Representative (Last name):

Who Should Attend; What to Plan

(Council President, Exec. Director of the

as well because they can be printed out and saved. Get the approval to use the letterhead of your Council or other professional stationery of the Society. Put your name, credentials, address, phone number, fax and e-mail address clearly on your letter. Be brief and to the point covering only one issue per letter. Keep a copy for yourself, and send a copy to your Network Coordinator. Use the official salutations for Senators and Representatives. Maintain respectful formality of titles in the letter.

If you are writing to state legislators, find out the correct names, salutations and addresses to use by calling your state legislature's information office.

Remember to put the purpose for the letter at the beginning along with who you are and the bill number if appropriate. Also be sure to give your affiliation with SVDP. Be sure to thank the elected official for any previous support on important issues.

Sample Letter to Member of Congress

Dear Senator/Representative _____:

I am writing to urge you to support _____ -- not only because it could significantly improve the quality of health care your constituents receive, but also because it would _____. (Follow by a brief description.)

In our service to the needy we have found...(statistics, stories). Our members see the needs first hand and.... I've enclosed an additional information sheet that provides more detail.

As a member of The St. Vincent de Paul Society and the (parish, city), I follow closely issues involving policy related to the needy. And as a member who serves the poor, I see first hand the critical role _____ plays improving the quality of lives. The nearly 930,000 members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul are committed to helping the needy live healthier lives. As you consider _____, consider the consequences that the passage of such a bill would have on so many lives.

I urge you to vote in favor of extending _____ to include _____. The issue is not just about saving money. It is about reducing unnecessary pain and suffering to thousands of your constituents.

Thank you very much for your interest in _____.

Sincerely,

Tips for sending E-mail to your elected official

- It is important to maintain a formal style in addressing your elected official, even when sending an E-mail. Use of informal style when addressing an elected official is inappropriate. Use the proper salutations. Keep the letter professional. The objective is to be heard and to be seriously considered.
- Use formality in salutations, structure, and subject matter just as when you write a letter on your letterhead. Like letters, e-mails can be printed out and saved. The E-mail is easy to copy and send to your Network Coordinator and SVDP Voice of the Poor Committee regional representatives.
- Follow up the E-mail, when possible with a written letter on your letterhead because that implies the official endorsement of your organization. (Be sure that the VOP Committee for your Council approves of this and that you have the approval of your Council President.)

How to invite your member of Congress to visit

The old saying that “seeing is believing” can work in your favor. Invite an elected official to see the Society at work in its own settings. Show tangible benefits of serving the poor first hand through the one-to-one work of the Society. Elected officials can be swayed into becoming supporters if they see the service in action, if they hear the stories, if they see the numbers served. These “site visits” have been effective around the country in convincing legislators to support the SVDP policy initiative. Following are some suggestions for success.

- Check with your Arch/Diocesan Council Network Coordinator to make sure no one else in your area is approaching the same legislator.
- Gain approval from the appropriate people in your Council.
- Check your Council’s schedule to determine any conflicts.
- Know the schedules of key members and supporters who will speak in support of the issue, so they can be available for the site visit.

- Plan ahead! Call your elected official's office to invite her/him and to determine when she/he will be in your area.
- Coordinate with the appropriate staff contact and the scheduler. Aim for about one hour, but determine the length of time the legislator can commit and plan accordingly.
- If the legislator cannot attend personally, pursue a site visit with staff members. Staff can carry substantial influence.
- Follow up in writing, confirm by telephone, and offer to answer any questions in advance.
- Provide an agenda well in advance of the visit. A sample agenda follows. Notify all staff at your organization of the visit several days in advance, so that everyone can be prepared.
- Call the day before to confirm one last time.
- Plan to take black-and-white photographs of the visit for use in newsletters and the media.
- Be flexible! Legislators have extremely busy schedules and many last minute changes.
- After the site visit, write a follow-up letter thanking the legislator and staff for coming to your place of work.

A site visit from a Senator, U.S. Representative, or state legislator can present an opportunity for media coverage. Consider arranging for television or newspaper reporters to accompany this visit. Discuss this carefully with the Council President and others who will be involved. Obtain the appropriate SVDP approval before sending out invitations to the press. Evaluate the benefits. If it is decided that this would be appropriate, you should also obtain approval from the elected official's office before proceeding, and work closely with his or her press secretary to coordinate.

Sample Agenda for Official Site Visit to Special Works Facility

Follow up after the visit

Once a relationship has been established it is important to stay in touch. Look for ways to become a trusted source of information related to the poor. Respond promptly to acknowledge the visit. There are many ways to follow up after a visit.

- Promptly write thank you letters for meetings and site visits.
- Acknowledge support when an elected official speaks out favorably on your issue or votes in committee or on the floor by writing, calling, or e-mailing.
- Attend a campaign fundraiser and bring along as many colleagues as possible when an elected official has been especially supportive. Make your presence known at the

Senator

The Honorable (Full name) U.S. Senate Washington, D.C. 20510
Dear Senator (Last name):

Time	Activity
9:00	Welcome Greet visitors at the front door
9:10	Special Works Area #1
9:30	Special Works Area #2

fundraiser.

- When new information supporting SVDP positions is available, send it and follow up with a phone call.
- If you see a letter-to-the-editor or editorial piece in your newspaper supporting the SVDP position on an issue, clip it and send it along with a letter.
- Professional studies from respected sources can be used effectively. If you see a reliable and valid study -- that supports an issue, send it to the elected official along with a brief letter in which you explain the implications. Use personal, local examples to illustrate the point.
- Be creative! Look for opportunities to stay in touch.

Representative

The Honorable (Full name) U.S. House of Representatives Washington D.C. 20515
Dear Representative (Last name):

Who Should Attend; What to Plan
(Council President, Exec. Director of the Society, key Vincentians, and key staff).
(Proceed immediately to service to the poor areas)
(Key staff with Vincentian committee chair lead tours; explain roles and procedures. Show how poor are served. Allow time for Q & A, speak with pre-selected poor, if possible.)

Get SVDP members involved

- Every contact does count. Every letter, every phone call, every contact creates a

stronger perception that the Society is a force to be reckoned with. At key times in the legislative process, such as when a bill is initiated or when a committee will vote, or final passage is at hand, it is necessary to involve the general membership. This is a tangible way for members to voice their concern for a specific issue and to stand up and be counted with the poor.

- Getting members involved at key junctures helps to multiply impact. When the staff of an elected official receives several letters or calls on a topic, they take note. When they receive hundreds or thousands, they know it has become an issue they must confront. In these cases quantity does matter.
- A notification procedure, e.g. phone tree, e-mail tree, handouts, or meetings, should be established which will alert each Conference member that group action is now required to support or oppose relevant issues effecting the poor. Information should be provided which informs the members about the key elements of the issue, what action is desired that they take, and the time frame that action is required. Postal or e-mail addresses for the appropriate legislators, or easily obtainable references or e-mail links, should be given to those requested to take action. A “sample: letter or statement in support/opposition to a specific piece of legislation is also helpful. Note: Form letters should not be copied verbatim by everyone or it may be considered a group pressure tactic and will probably be ignored – use your own words. Follow up to the membership with personal phone calls and contact to encourage participation and to express the importance of taking individual action.

Remember that the goal is to influence legislators that the public is concerned. Dissemination of this information by approved methods, to others in the parish/community, may result in many others also taking up the cause.