

# *Persons Experiencing Homelessness*

## **The Position of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul National Council of the United States**

### *A Message from Our President*

Dear Brother and Sister Vincentians,

America is facing a homelessness crisis, but I believe it is one we can solve together. Homelessness prevention policies show great promise in helping those who are living on the edge.

Homelessness is a complex crisis demanding coordinated effort—and the surest way forward is to empower initiatives and services at the local level. As Vincentians are aware, people most in need of assistance are often the most reluctant to seek out or accept it from the government. Instead, effective programs for helping the currently unhoused or the at-risk can only be built on relationships. The state is ill-equipped for that sort of person-to-person encounter, which is why nonprofits and voluntary organizations like SVDP must lead the way.

Homelessness prevention programs such as those we use at SVDP are flexible and personalized, so they can help to cover rent and pay utilities, procure food or childcare, help with employment searches, and negotiate with landlords.

We need many more resources to fight homelessness at the local level. Vincentians must look out for, and act on, issues from the perspective of the homeless. The needs of those suffering from homelessness must not be ignored.

Yours in Christ,

John Berry  
National Council of the United States

Homelessness persists as a reality for hundreds of thousands of people in the United States. The Catholic Church has a deep concern for the poor and homeless. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus challenges all of us to be attentive to those who need our help, whether they have been wounded by violence, misfortune, or poverty. Housing is recognized in Catholic social teaching as a demand of the common good, a basic right, and a necessity for a truly human life; in fact, the right to housing is found in the Church's Charter of the Rights of the Family (Holy See, Charter of the Rights of the Family, Washington, DC: USCC Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, 1983).

"Sheltering the homeless" is a corporal work of mercy (CCC 2447). As Pope John Paul II said, "A house is much more than a roof over one's head." It is "a place where a person creates and lives out his or her life." (Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, *What Have You Done to Your Homeless Brother? The Church and the Homeless Problem*, December 27, 1987)

Our manual states: "The poor have the right to shelter: Vincentians welcome strangers and the homeless and provide temporary shelter. We build and administer housing, providing furnishings and household items."

Policies and practices of government and economic institutions are not adequately responding to the needs of the homeless. It reminds us that God heard the cries of the homeless in the Bible and that working for justice with and for homeless people is doing God's will and work in the world.

"The Church, 'sharing the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or affected in any way,' feels it has a serious obligation to join with those who are working, without self-interest and with dedication, to find concrete and urgent solutions to the housing problem and to see that the homeless receive the necessary attention and concern on the part of public authorities."

--Pope Paul II, *Letter to Pontifical Commission Justitia et Pax* (December 8, 1987).

*“A network of friends, inspired by Gospel values, growing in holiness and building a more just world through personal relationships with and service to people in need.”*

### ***Our Catholic and Vincentian Tradition***

“We can find no social or moral justification, no justification whatsoever, for lack of housing,” the Pope Francis said in a speech in Washington, DC in 2015. “The son of God came into this world as a homeless person,” he continued. “The son of God knew what it was to start life without a roof over his head.”

Homelessness has continued to rise; homeless services systems continue to expand the availability of both temporary and permanent beds, but these resources still fall short of reaching everyone in need. The policies and practices of government and economic institutions are not adequately responding to the increasing number of homeless people in our country.

“Racism can also be institutional, when practices or tradition are upheld that treat certain groups of people unjustly. The cumulative effects of personal sins of racism have led to social structures of injustice and violence that makes us all accomplices in racism.” (Open Wide Our Hears, The Enduring Call to Love, pastoral letter, 2018 Fall General Assembly)

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, most minority groups, especially African Americans and Indigenous people, experience homelessness at higher rates than Whites, largely due to long-standing historical and structural racism. These social and community sins of racism manifest themselves in federal, state, and county zoning laws, which prohibit the building and sale of low-income housing; “gentlemen’s agreements” in which there is an understanding that whites will not sell their homes to people of color; and redlining, which earmarks communities of color as unsafe and undesirable to invest or live in. In addition, people who were formerly incarcerated face housing discrimination because of their felony status and laws that prevent them from access to public housing.

### ***Our Faith In Action***

In your Conference and Parish Community:

1. Live Gospel values: treat the homeless with kindness and dignity, and as the Rule instructs, “...seek to understand them as ... a brother or sister.”
2. Counter NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitudes by sharing stories of neighbors to describe the need to parishioners, neighbors, and work colleagues to make them aware that “but for the grace of God go I.”
3. Become a presence and a voice of prayer: encourage churches, community groups, private sector, and state and local governments to do more to meet our common responsibility for housing.

In your Council:

1. Advocate for housing and work with local Continuums of Care (CoCs).
2. Working with their Voice for the Poor committee(s):
  - Make elected officials accountable and build public will to end homelessness: local, state, and federal government officials must be called to task to address homelessness and seek solutions rather than avoiding or placing blame.
  - Identify and speak against laws that criminalize the homeless.
  - Encourage “housing first” with supportive services: document how supportive housing for the chronically homeless is more cost-effective than addressing problems through incarceration and emergency room visits.
  - Speak out in favor of increasing funding for homeless assistance programs.
  - Seek improvements in the homeless service system