



Position Statement on Homelessness Recommendations by the Voice of the Poor Committee Council of the United States

We ask you to become more informed and active citizens, using your voices and votes to speak for the voiceless, to defend the poor and the vulnerable and to advance the common good. **We are called to shape a constituency of conscience, measuring every policy by how it touches the least, the lost, and the left-out among us.** —US Catholic Bishops (1)

Situation

The number of people who meet the Federal Government's definition of homelessness is growing rapidly. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in a February 2007 report to Congress identifies more than three-quarters of a million homeless persons in the United States who live in shelters, transitional housing and on the street. The number of those identified as homeless outstrips the number of available beds in shelters and transitional housing by 300,000, according to HUD's Annual Homeless Assessment Report. (2)

Title 42 of the US Code (3) passed by Congress states:

1. the Nation faces an immediate and unprecedented crisis due to the lack of shelter for a growing number of individuals and families, including elderly persons, handicapped persons, families with children, Native Americans, and veterans;
2. the problem of homelessness has become more severe and, in the absence of more effective efforts, is expected to become dramatically worse, endangering the lives and safety of the homeless;
3. the causes of homelessness are many and complex, and homeless individuals have diverse needs;
4. there is no single, simple solution to the problem of homelessness because of the different subpopulations of the homeless, the different causes of and reasons for homelessness, and the different needs of homeless individuals;
5. due to the record increase in homelessness, States, units of local government, and private voluntary organizations have been unable to meet the basic human needs of all the homeless and, in the absence of greater Federal assistance, will be unable to protect the lives and safety of all the homeless in need of assistance; and
6. the Federal Government has a clear responsibility and an existing capacity to fulfill a more effective and responsible role to meet the basic human needs and to engender respect for the human dignity of the homeless. *(Continued on back page)*

Vincentian Response to Homelessness

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul must look out for and act on issues from the perspective of the homeless. As advocates, voters, tax payers, and constituents of politicians we have a voice and we must insure that the poor are listened to. We are helping them channel their voice. The needs of those suffering from homelessness must not be ignored.

Message From Our President

Dear Brother and Sister Vincentians,

Vincentians encounter the suffering Christ in countless individuals and families who are homeless or on the brink of homelessness. Struggling for mere existence, they are caught in a vicious cycle with no quick-and-easy solutions. Their needs are diverse requiring much more than the Society can provide. We must look beyond what we are able to do and call local, state and federal government to task insisting on effective mid-term and long-term solutions.

While Vincentians are urged to charity, the Rule of the Society also asks that we search for justice by identifying the root causes of poverty and working towards their elimination. (4)

May God bless your work as a voice of the poor in promoting the rights, responsibilities and development of all people.

Yours in Christ,

Joseph Flannigan
National President, Council of the United States

Our Position: Homelessness is a Condition Not a Crime

- No person should be forced to live in bodily fear or in substandard conditions. Every person needs access to minimum living conditions — safety, access to sanitation, food, clothing, shelter, medical assistance.
- Particular attention must be given to those who are unable to care for themselves — children and youth, the elderly, sick, addicted, mentally ill.
- There is no substitute for an involved, effective, and committed government. We believe local, state and federal governments must make poverty a priority and become involved in addressing solutions, including fully funding programs that tackle homelessness.
- Every person deserves an education. Practical, hands-on job training that teaches a job proficiency and provides those with limited skills the opportunity to earn a decent income can go a long way to building self esteem and dignity.
- Workers must earn enough to be able to provide shelter and a decent life for their families. Communities cannot be satisfied with a minimum wage that is lower than the cost of living.
- Safe, reliable, affordable child care is critical. Welfare to work programs must include funding for quality child care.
- It is shameful that any veteran need resort to homelessness. More attention and care must be given by the Federal government to meet the needs of veterans, particularly those with physical and mental health challenges, as they progress back to the community.

Catholic Teaching

Pastoral letters and encyclicals speak of the dignity of every person and our responsibility for one another. The following statements are from *Gaudium et Spes*, *Pacem in Terris*, and *Economic Justice for All*.

...there is a growing awareness of the exalted dignity proper to the human person, since he stands above all things, and his rights and duties are universal and inviolable. Therefore, there must be made available to all men everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy and rightful freedom even in matters religious. (5)

We see that every human has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life: these are primarily to food, to clothing, to shelter, to rest, to medical care, and the necessary social services. (6)

No one may claim the name of Christian and be comfortable in the face of hunger, homelessness, insecurity, and injustice found in this country and the world.... The common bond of humanity that links all persons is the source of our belief that the country can attain a renewed moral vision. (7)

Human rights are the minimum conditions for life in community. In Catholic teaching, human rights include not only civil and political rights but also economic rights.... This means that when people are without a chance to earn a living, and must go hungry and homeless, they are being denied basic rights. Society must ensure that these rights are protected. (8)

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). (9)

Homelessness Demographic Estimates

- √ About one-third of the US adult homeless population have served their country in the Armed Services with estimates of 200,000 living on the streets or in shelters on any given day. (10)
- √ Nearly one-quarter of all sheltered homeless persons are aged 17 or younger; approximately 66 percent of sheltered homeless are individuals and 34 percent are persons in families with children. (11)
- √ Of all homeless, 23% (169,879) are identified as chronically homeless. (12)
- √ Homeless living in cities: 22 percent of those who are homeless in cities are considered mentally ill; 30 percent are substance abusers; 15 percent are employed; and 11 percent are veterans. Homeless families with children comprise 33%, while 17% are homeless single women and 43% are single men. (13)

Programs, Services and Definitions

Supportive Housing - This form of co-housing is often targeted to low-income workers and populations in need of assistance such as the homeless, those suffering from mental illness or substance abuse problems, the elderly or medically frail. Supportive housing is designed to assist individuals socially and with basic life skills. Housing is coupled with social services such as job training, alcohol and drug abuse programs and case management. Supportive housing is available on an ongoing and/or permanent basis or through a transition period of dependence on others. Nursing homes, retirement communities and halfway houses are supportive housing examples.

Transitional Housing - Programs that assist people who are ready to move beyond emergency shelter. These programs usually provide housing and comprehensive support to homeless and at-risk families so that they can make transformational changes in their lives.

Services to End Long-Term Homelessness Act (SELHA) - SELHA is a legislative initiative, proposed by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Corporation for Supportive Housing, National Alliance on Mental Illness, National AIDS Housing Coalition, and Enterprise, to fund supportive services for the permanent supportive housing necessary to end long-term homelessness.

Housing Trust Fund - A campaign working to establish a National Housing Trust Fund (14) that would help communities build, rehab and preserve housing so that lowest income families can afford safe and adequate homes. The campaign seeks 1.5 million units of primarily rental housing for lowest income families over the next 10 years with 75% of funding devoted to extremely low income families.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Program - How Congress funds the McKinney-Vento Program affects homeless housing grants. Simply maintaining funding of the program continues to keep thousands of people homeless due to insufficient services to meet needs for supportive housing and facilities to assist the homeless with emergency shelter, transitional housing, and single room occupancy. Tripling current funding, while encouraging novel solutions, would be a step in the right direction. US Conference of Catholic Bishops supports the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act of 2007 (HR 840) as the reauthorization vehicle for the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act which expands the definition of homelessness to include families who double up or live in motels; increases supportive services; and provides for more housing solutions. This primary piece of federal legislation also deals with the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness in U.S. public schools. It was reauthorized as Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act in January 2002.

Section 8 Housing - This is the government's major Federal assistance program dedicated to sponsoring subsidized housing for low-income families, the elderly, and the disabled. It is formally known as the Housing Choice Voucher Program, but is still commonly referred to as simply Section 8. (15) The program allows participants to choose and lease or purchase safe, decent, affordable privately-owned rental housing in the private market. (16) (17)

Recommendations for Councils and Conferences

Vincentians are called to serve growing numbers of homeless and precariously housed individuals and families across the U.S. at the rectory door, in the community, and through special works ministries in Society-run service centers. Funds are not sufficient to meet growing demands and needs go unmet with no immediate solution in sight. Cries for help continue to mount for affordable housing and supportive services. So much is needed beyond what the Society is able to provide.

In prayers of the Society, members pray for “families and those who have no homes that they may quickly find a place in which they can live a decent and happy life.” As we seek to “become a “visible sign of Christ” giving “witness to His boundless love which reaches out to all and “draws them to love one another in Him” may we be granted the wisdom, strength, and courage to be a voice of the poor.

1. Micro Action: In Your Conference and Parish Community

- ♥ **Live Gospel values.** Treat individuals and families who are homeless and those who are precariously housed with kindness and dignity. According to the Rule of the Society, “Vincentians endeavour to establish relationships based on trust and friendship. Conscious of their own frailty and weakness, their hearts beat with the heartbeat of the poor. They do not judge those they serve. Rather they seek to understand them as they would a brother or sister.” (18)
- ♥ **Counter NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitudes.** Use stories, statistics and service of the Society locally and nationally to describe the need. Begin with parishioners, neighbors and work colleagues to overcome fear and help build relationships, to assist with housing, jobs, education, child care, etc. Make others aware that “but for the grace of God go I.”
- ♥ **Become a presence and a voice of prayer.** Encourage churches, community groups, private sector, state/local government to do more to meet our common responsibility for housing. Establish a prayer ministry at shelter sites, homeless help desks, food pantries... Invite parish prayer groups to collaborate. Educate liturgists/homilists around homelessness in the community in prayers of the faithful, homilies, communion dismissals, etc.
- ♥ **Take a proactive stance on homelessness.** Recognizing that it is always less costly to prevent homelessness than to end it, SVDP Councils should provide education and ongoing information to Conferences on public and private sources of housing assistance. Conference members will then be better prepared to assist the persons seeking assistance regarding more affordable housing. Assisting with the application process for these programs is also an appropriate role for Conference members.

2. Macro Action: Speaking Out About the Big Picture

- ♥ **Make officials accountable and build public will to end homelessness.** Local/state/federal governments must address homelessness and seek solutions rather than avoiding or placing blame. When homelessness is out of sight it is out of mind and public officials can skirt the issue to appease business and community interests. The removal of homeless encampments without providing housing alternatives is an example. The homeless remain in the same predicament. They come back, set up camp, and similar action is taken again, and again. In small towns the solution to provide bus tickets to cities whose services are already operating on overload simply moves the homeless on. It does not solve the underlying problem. Officials must be called to task.
- ♥ **Identify and speak against laws that victimize the homeless.** Oppose laws used to criminalize the poor. Loitering laws, for example, that are used to systematically move the homeless away from town centers, business districts, neighborhoods, and main roads. The homeless are warned, cited, or jailed for “loitering” on a public sidewalk.
- ♥ **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** including the number of rent subsidy programs especially for extremely low income households, such as expanding Section 8 programs and permanent housing for low and moderate-income families (i.e., National and State Housing Trust Funds). Support preservation and building of quality low income housing for families, the elderly and other vulnerable persons; as well as the participation and partnership of residents, nonprofit community groups and churches to build and preserve affordable housing.
- ♥ **Seek improvements in the homeless service system.** There currently are a number of different programs addressing the issue of homelessness. (19) Many of these programs work independently of each other. Development of a comprehensive plan with measurable goals and outcomes would be beneficial in addressing the homeless situation.



**Council of the United States
Society of St. Vincent de Paul**
58 Progress Parkway
St. Louis, MO 63043-3706

PHONE: 314-576-3993 FAX: 314-576-6755
E-MAIL: usacouncil@svdpusa.org

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Through Title 42, Congress established an Interagency Council on the Homeless. (20) Congress also agreed to use public resources and programs in "a more coordinated manner to meet the critically urgent needs of the homeless of the Nation; and to provide funds for programs to assist the homeless with special emphasis on elderly persons, handicapped persons, families with children, Native Americans, and veterans.

In the annual survey of 24 US cities by the US Conference of Mayors (21), "lack of affordable housing lead(s) the list of causes of homelessness. Other causes cited, in order of frequency include low-paying jobs, mental illness and the lack of needed services, substance abuse and the lack of needed services, domestic violence, unemployment, poverty, and prisoner re-entry."

Government Definition of Homelessness

According to Federal law (22) (23) (24), a homeless person is an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; or an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is: a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill); or an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.

Critics argue that the federal definition does not account for all homeless persons and excludes many needy from certain federal assistance programs because they do not meet eligibility requirements. In addition, the mobile and often hidden nature of homelessness makes it difficult to get hard numbers on the size of this population. Some estimates indicate that 3.5 million people experience homelessness in a given year (1% of the entire U.S. population or 10% of its poor); about 842,000 people on any given day. (25)

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Vincentian Reflection:

**"I bring you tidings of great joy.
Unto you is born a Savior, Who is Christ the Lord!"**

Ponder the story of Mary and Joseph journeying from Galilee to Bethlehem, carrying little more than what they could personally bear; relying on a mule for transportation. Recall how Joseph could not find fit lodging for Mary who was in labor with child — only a manger. It was here, just off the road, that the little homeless child, Jesus, was born to Mary, a homeless teenage mother. Warned of a sweep by government officials, the refugee couple with child, fled to Egypt. They lived in fear knowing there would be dire consequences by an enraged establishment should they be discovered.

In later years, Jesus moved from place to place, hanging out with undesirables (tax collectors, prostitutes, sick, the lame...). He had run-ins with officials, wandered into the desert, broke bread with the masses, preached the Good News.

After entering Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus was viewed by government officials as a poor loser. He was despised by the community, who asked to have a criminal freed instead of Jesus. He was denied by his own friends. Taunted, alone, and with garments rendered, Jesus was left miserable and suffering. No one showed compassion. Demeaned, degraded, and finally crucified He cried,

"My Lord and my God why have you abandoned me."