

MIDEAST VOICES



Mideast Voice of the Poor, Columbus, OH

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A Busy Summer

By Warren Wright

Dear Vincentians and Friends:

Hope everyone is having a great summer!

This 4th edition of Mideast Voices will bring everyone up-to-date on a very busy time in our advocacy for those we serve. As many of you are aware, Medicaid Expansion has been an ongoing issue at the state level during the 2013 legislative sessions in Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan and Ohio. Updates of the status in each state are presented here. Immigration Reform and the Farm Bill are currently active issues in the US Congress that need our attention. The current congressional recess from August 2 to September 9 offers us a good opportunity to visit with our federal legislators in their district offices to present the SVdP positions on these issues.

As SVdP pursues a course of ending poverty through systemic change, the VOP committee in Columbus, Ohio recently invited leaders (Mary Jones and Clark Washington) and an organizer (Molly Sweeney) of the Detroit Action Commonwealth (DAC) to speak with us about their experiences organizing in soup kitchens in the Detroit area. A discussion of the DAC process and their successes is found in this issue. The Columbus VOP anticipates submitting a grant application to the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) in the upcoming funding cycle to acquire funds for building an organization, led by those we serve, where those we serve will advocate on their own behalf (and in collaboration with other groups as deemed appropriate). The DAC experience serves as a model as we move forward on this.

Finally, 2013 marks the 50th Anniversary of Pope John XXIII's Encyclical *Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth)*. In continuing our series on the papal encyclicals of Catholic Social Teaching, Jerry Freewalt from the Diocese of Columbus Office of Social Concerns presents a discussion of the key elements of this encyclical.

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As World Youth Day has come to a close, I think words from Pope Francis can continue provide guidance to our VOP work. *"I would like to make an appeal to those in possession of greater resources, to public authorities and to all people of good will who are working for social justice: never tire of working for a more just world, marked by greater solidarity! No one can remain insensitive to the inequalities that persist in the world! Everybody, according to his or her particular opportunities, should be able to make a personal contribution to putting an end to so many social injustices. The culture of selfishness and individualism that often prevails in our society is not what builds and leads to a more habitable world; it is the culture of solidarity that does so, seeing others not as rivals or statistics, but brothers and sisters."*

Thanks for all you do for those we serve.

Blessings,
Warren Wright
SVdP Mideast VOP Representative

"The mystery of the poor is this: That they are Jesus, and what you do for them you do for Him. It is the only way we have of knowing and believing in our love. The mystery of poverty is that by sharing in it, making ourselves poor in giving to others, we increase our knowledge of and belief in love." Dorothy Day

Farm Bill Update

By Warren Wright

On June 18, the US Senate passed a five-year extension of the Farm Bill through fiscal year 2018 by a vote of 66–27. The legislation included \$4 billion in cuts to funding for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Food Stamps). According to Bread for the World, these cuts will affect approximately a half million families with a monthly benefit reduction of \$90. The US House could not pass an extension to the Farm Bill that included \$20.5 billion in cuts to SNAP. With a threatened presidential veto, the House rejected this version of the Farm Bill extension on June 20 by a 234 – 195 vote. Subsequently, the House went on to pass an extension to the Farm Bill that did not include any funding for SNAP or other domestic and international nutrition assistance.

Where do we go from here? The House intends to take up SNAP and other nutrition program funding separately. The SVdP position is to maintain SNAP funding at their current levels. Also, the House and Senate will need to convene a conference committee to produce a final bill for the president to sign. SVdP would like a final Farm Bill closer to the Senate version.



On average, 51 million individuals were eligible for benefits each month in 2010, and 38 million received them. From the SNAP Website

Much misinformation has been circulating about SNAP fraud. In speaking with your legislators during the summer recess, it is important to communicate to them that SNAP, along with the Earned Income Tax Credit, are two of the most effective anti-poverty programs the US has. It has been shown in a study conducted by Hilary Hoynes of UC Davis to move people towards self-sufficiency and away from dependency. As many of those we serve can attest, it is difficult to work effectively at a job, or go to school and learn, if you are not properly nourished.

Comprehensive Immigration Reform Update

By Warren Wright

On June 27, the US Senate has passed S744, the Border Security, Economic Competitiveness, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013. Passage was with bi-partisan support on a 68–32 vote. The bill contains provisions for a path to citizenship, border security, an improved legal immigration system, an effective Employment Verification System, an improved process for agricultural and low-skilled workers, and protection of workers' rights. DREAM Act provisions are also contained in the legislation. According to Archbishop Jose H. Gomez, chairman of the USCCB Committee on Migration, the legislation would “allow immigrants and their families to come out of the shadows and into the light and would protect families from separation.”

Bishop Gomez stated that the USCCB does not agree with all elements of the bill, including the unprecedented buildup of enforcement resources along the southern border (at a cost of \$46 billion dollars). These provisions include doubling the number of Border Patrol agents and providing warfare technology for non-military operations by introducing drones, infrared sensors, and \$140 million dollars of Blackhawk helicopters into civilian border communities. These border security provisions, part of the Corker–Hoeven amendment offered during debate on the House floor, satisfied

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VOP Columbus visits Representative Pat Tiberi

By Gary and Beth Schwarzmuller and Warren Wright

On August 22, 2013 Voice of the Poor representatives Beth Schwarzmuller, Gary Schwarzmuller, Maureen Malek, Lesha Farias, Deb Gorsuch and Warren Wright took advantage of the summer recess of Congress to meet with Representative Pat Tiberi in his Columbus office. Also in attendance were Mark Bell, Tiberi's Chief of Staff and by phone from the Washington office, Rebecca Kastan, Senior Legislative Assistant.

The purpose of the meeting was to share our concerns regarding the need for comprehensive immigration reform, specifically highlighting a desire for compassion for the 11 million undocumented immigrants currently living in limbo while waiting for a defined path towards citizenship. The current plan is for the House of Representatives to vote on separate sections/issues rather than voting on one large bill as the Senate has. Representative Tiberi did mention that he is in favor of legalization of immigrants status as workers and not citizenship.

Finding Voices; Giving Voice

By Deb Zabloudil

Many people who live in poverty do not think that they have a voice – at least not a voice that will make a difference with local or state governments. Members of the Detroit Action Commonwealth (DAC) came to Columbus to tell us a different story.

A University of Michigan professor, teaching a class in community organizing, and his students wanted to put their classroom theory into action. They were told they could never organize the homeless; and they wanted to prove those naysayers wrong. The students started by visiting soup kitchens, not to serve food, but to eat with those who came for lunch. Over time, the students were able to develop relationships with those who relied on the soup kitchen for food. They talked to the clients about organizing so that they could collectively join together to work on issues that affected their lives. And organize they did. The Detroit Action Commonwealth was born, brought to life in 2008 by those without

Representative Tiberi cited the July 2012 General Accounting Office document GAO012-670 (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Improved Oversight of State Eligibility Criteria Needed) about SNAP program integrity as justification for SNAP cuts. Actual reading of the document shows persons not eligible under strict SNAP guidelines (incomes less than 130% of the poverty level) have become eligible as states have implemented broad-based categorical criteria in an effort to streamline the program and reduce administrative costs. The report concludes that state eligibility expansions need better oversight and could result in a reduction in eligible households (473,000) for a \$460 million (\$0.46 billion) reduction in benefits. This is less than 1 percent of the total SNAP program (\$71 billion).

The exchange of ideas was lively and informative.

"When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying a debt of justice."
-St. Gregory the Great

homes who wanted to be heard, and by the students who assisted them in finding their voices and organizing for collective action.

The DAC holds meetings, members pay dues and receive name badges. Most importantly, they join together to take action when practice and policies create a negative impact on their lives. Each soup kitchen has at least one member sitting on the board of the DAC.

The leaders of the organization have been homeless; they've experienced the worst of what it means to live on the street. They partner with the community organizers from University of Michigan. Leaders have received training in direct action and issues research. Several of the leaders are now being trained as community organizers and are known as OITs (Organizers in Training).

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What are some of the issues they have tackled?

1. Many homeless do not have ID's. That means they can be arrested on the spot when they are stopped by Detroit police. What happens when they are picked up by the police? They are driven out of the city and into the suburbs by police only to be dropped off without money (the police take their money) or ID. Without an ID, they are likely to be picked up and arrested by suburban police. DAC and the ACLU found out about this and have essentially stopped the practice. They have also made arrangements for the homeless to get IDs.
2. They invite candidates to come to the Soup Kitchen to speak to their constituents prior to elections – and the candidates come! They also sponsor Voter Registration Drives at the soup kitchens.
3. When vacant lots are ignored and the grass grows and creates a hazard, they contact the city to take care of it – and they do. Sometimes, they mow the lawns themselves.
4. DAC has worked with the courts to bring “Street Court” to the soup kitchens.

“The enormity of problems like hunger and social injustice can certainly motivate us to act. We can be convinced logically of the need for intervention and change. But it is the story of one individual that ultimately makes the difference—by offering living proof.”

John Capecci and Timothy Cage

The DAC is funded by the University of Michigan and they are getting additional funds from Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). What has been accomplished in Detroit is a model for what Voice of the Poor hopes to create in Columbus – a grassroots community organization formed by the poor with the help of VOP, to give the poor opportunities for leadership, to find their voices and to speak up about those local, state and federal issues that affect their personal dignity and wellbeing.

Watch for more information about the development of the group in Columbus and for updates about the DAC.

“This is happening today. If investments in banks fall, it is a tragedy and people say ‘what are we going to do?’ but if people die of hunger, have nothing to eat or suffer from poor health, that’s nothing. This is our crisis today,”

- Pope Francis

Parish Happenings

St. Paul in Westerville, in conjunction with the Catholic Latino Ministry Office in the Columbus Diocese is sponsoring a Holy Hour to pray for Congress as they debate immigration reform. Representative Tiberi has been invited to attend. Please join them as they pray for Congress as they debate immigration reform. This Holy Hour is part of the St. Paul’s Respect Life Month Activities.

St. Timothy in Columbus is participating in the Food Stamp Challenge during the week leading up to the Walk for the Poor. Parish leaders are invited to try to live on no more than \$4.00 per day for a week. Participants are being asked to donate the difference between their regular food expenditures and the \$28 food stamp budget to the Walk for the Poor. For more information about sponsoring a Food Stamp Challenge at your parish see

<http://frac.org/initiatives/snapfood-stamp-challenges/>

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senators who thought the original border security provisions did not go far enough, likely securing needed votes for passage of the bill. It must be noted that all of the border security provisions above would be undertaken on the heels of the unprecedented growth in the immigration enforcement apparatus over the last decade.

However, the legislation is viewed as an overall improvement upon the status quo for undocumented persons. Our job now is to seek improvements to the Senate legislation and any legislation to be considered in the US House of Representatives, including making the path to citizenship for undocumented persons more accessible and achievable.

It is now time for the US House to act. The USCCB's Justice for Immigrants campaign indicates that action in the House will occur in September and October after the summer recess. Please make every effort to visit your US

representative in their district office during the summer recess (Aug 2 to September 9). If a visit is not possible, please call them. If you cannot speak directly with them, ask to speak with their aide responsible for the immigration reform issue.

“Charity is no substitute for justice withheld.”

St. Augustine

Medicaid Expansion Update

By Warren Wright

The Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, and Ohio legislatures have now either completed or nearly completed their 2013 legislative sessions. With implementation of the Affordable Care Act underway, it is up to states to expand Medicaid to ensure that citizens earning up to 133% of the poverty level have medical coverage. If Medicaid is not expanded in states, these persons will not have health insurance coverage. Below is a summary of action taken on Medicaid Expansion in each state during the 2013 legislative sessions.

Indiana: The legislature did not include Medicaid expansion in its 2013–2014 budget. It did not have the support of either the governor or the legislature. As the session ended on April 26, Medicaid expansion was left to the Governor, Mike Pence, to determine with the Federal authorities. The outcome for poor families, mostly working poor, is uncertain. It is hoped that with some flexibility

granted by the Federal program the Governor will find a way to extend coverage for these families. The attempt to lower eligibility for prenatal coverage was stopped. Mothers will still be eligible up to 200 % of poverty.

Kentucky: Gov. Steve Beshear announced in May that Kentucky will accept the federal offer for Medicaid Expansion under the Affordable Care Act. Kentucky is now moving forward with the Medicaid Expansion process. In doing so, up to 330,000 Kentuckians, most individuals with no dependent children, will now have health coverage through Medicaid. Between 2014 and 2021, the state expects to receive \$15.6 billion in federal funds for the program and see 17,000 new jobs created.

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Voice of the Poor (VOP) Voice of the Poor does not take positions for or against a political party or individual candidates. However, Voice of the poor is interested in working with those elected officials, whether Republicans or Democrats, who support initiatives that will benefit the poor, children, elderly, immigrants – documented or not, and all of those who SVdP cares for and serves.

We're on the Web!

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Michigan: Gov. Rick Snyder is expected to sign the Medicaid Expansion bill into law after being passed by both the Michigan House and Senate. With support of the Michigan Catholic Conference, the bill retains many of the concepts passed last month by the House of Representatives, including expanding Medicaid coverage to those earning up to 133 percent of the federal poverty level. Medicaid Expansion in Michigan will result in an additional 400,000 low-income residents receiving health coverage and an influx of \$2 billion in federal funds over the next 10 years.

Ohio: Gov. John Kasich was in support of Medicaid Expansion and included it in his 2013–2015 biennial budget. However, both houses of the legislature stripped it from the budget. Discussions are now ongoing in both houses over a separate bill that would implement the expansion. If enacted, nearly 600,000 uninsured Ohioans would receive health coverage. Ohio would receive approximately \$17 billion in federal dollars over the next 5 years resulting in a boost to the economy and job creation.

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