

MIDEAST VOICES



Mideast Voice of the Poor, Columbus, OH

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“Let Us Show Mercy”

VOP Vincentians and Friends:

Hoping everyone is having a blessed Easter season! The last two months have given us a chance to witness two historic occasions in our Church. The first took place on April 1 when a group of Bishops visited the US/Mexico border in Arizona to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters suffering from our broken immigration system. Liturgy was celebrated and the Holy Eucharist that unites us was distributed to persons on both sides of the border through the border wall. A border wall cannot break the bonds we have with our brothers and sisters in other nations. Cardinal O’Malley delivered a challenging homily during the liturgy, part of which is printed in this edition of Mideast Voices. The US Bishops, and we as Vincentians, continue to advocate for comprehensive immigration reform on the part of our national government.

The second event occurred on April 27 as two of our former Popes, John XXIII and John Paul II, were canonized saints on Divine Mercy Sunday by Pope Francis. Saints John XXIII and John Paul II became known during their papacies for extolling mercy that is becoming a hallmark of Pope Francis’ papacy. They were leaders for the church as it seeks to engage the people of many nations who daily exhibit the wounds of Jesus, whose passion, death and resurrection we just celebrated.

Our brothers and sisters in prison, and recently released, show the wounds of Jesus daily in their struggle to realize their human dignity. A national grant from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has been given to the National Council of SVDP for use in 5 cities – Cincinnati, New Orleans, Milwaukee, Orlando, and Boston. The goal of this grant will be empower ex-offenders to take charge

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of their lives and attain the dignity they justly deserve. Paul Graham discusses the details of this project. Two pieces of legislation are pending in the US Congress that would allow us as a nation to further extend mercy to prisoners and ex-prisoners – reauthorization of the Second Chance Act and the Smarter Sentencing Act. If passed, policies would be changed to assist prisoners and ex-prisoners in their effort to live more fully human lives. Information on both of these contained in this newsletter.

With Vincent and Frederic as examples, let us continue to show mercy through our actions with and on behalf of those we serve.

Thanks for all you do for those we serve.

Blessings,

Warren Wright
SVdP Mideast VOP Representative

“You tell us that to love God and neighbor is not something abstract, but profoundly concrete: it means seeing in every person the face of the Lord to be served, to serve him concretely. And you are, dear brothers and sisters, the face of Jesus.

-Pope Francis

Detroit Action Commonwealth – Fighting for Justice

By Molly Sweeney

Detroit Action Commonwealth (D.A.C.) is a membership organization of homeless and near-homeless individuals in the City of Detroit. DAC develops individual and collective power to challenge and change the root causes of poverty, homelessness, and injustice. DAC has chapters at three soup kitchens. The reason D.A.C works out of soup kitchens is because no matter where our membership lives they always come back to the same place to eat.

In the community organizing world it is often said that you cannot organize homeless people. However, D.A.C is proving that statement wrong. Since 2008 the organization has more than 2000 members and an elected board of members leading the organization.

More importantly, Detroit Action Commonwealth has successfully addressed issues that affect their members, their families, and the Michigan homeless

community including: suing the Secretary of State to waive the State ID fee for indigent Michiganders; starting a court for homeless individuals whose legal issues were holding them back from obtaining housing and recovery; passing a city-policy, Ban the Box, to provide equal access employment for returning citizens; and improving homeless shelters and warming centers in the city.

Currently, D.A.C is working to expand access to quality, affordable housing in the City of Detroit and developing their own homeless organizing curriculum to share with other homeless organizing groups around the country. In addition, DAC is working to obtain their 501c3 status and raise funds to continue their fight for justice.

If you would like more information about DAC or would like to donate to the organization please visit: <http://www.detroitaction.org>.

Thoughts on Implementing Systemic Change

By: Jody Stahr

National St. Vincent De Paul has been embarking on a new vision aimed at “Ending Poverty through Systemic Change.” National SVDP has stressed that this new vision is not aimed at changing our current ministries, but rather at enhancing them. They stress that this vision is “rooted in our heritage and spirituality.” (Quotations taken from National SVDP *Transforming Lives* literature)

One of the first things we have to understand about systemic change is that it has to start with us. We may need to make some adjustments in the way we look at or in the way that we do things. We need to gain a better understanding of the individuals and families we are working with, for it is only through a better understanding of the “formidable problem of poverty” that we can suggest possible reforms.

National SVDP feels that systemic change:

- Goes beyond immediate needs
- Partners with the poor
- Transforms attitudes
- Changes structures

One way National recommends we might gain a better understanding is to learn from the principles found in the book, *Bridges Out of Poverty*, by Ruby Payne, Phillip DeVol, and Terie Dreussi Smith. This book was written to “help us understand how economic class affects the way we and those we serve view the world.”

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THE SECOND CHANCE REAUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2013

The bipartisan Second Chance Act, passed into law in 2008, reduced prison costs and improved public safety by giving federal, state, and local governments' additional tools to help inmates more successfully reintegrate into their communities upon release and avoid reoffending. The bipartisan Second Chance Reauthorization Act of 2013 improves and consolidates the programs authorized by the Second Chance Act, and reauthorizes them at reduced levels to better reflect current appropriations.

The Second Chance Reauthorization Act of 2013 improves state and local grant programs to promote successful prisoner reentry and improve public safety.

- When inmates are released from prison, they face myriad challenges, including finding housing and employment, combating substance abuse, and physical and mental health problems. Without community support, they are less likely to reintegrate into their communities, and more likely to offend again, making us less safe.
- The Second Chance Act and this reauthorization are firmly grounded in evidence-based practices. This legislation continues targeted funding through 2018 for reentry programs at the state and local level that have been proven to reduce recidivism, lead to better outcomes for those released from prison, and save prison costs.
- The bill provides separate planning and implementation grants to ensure that projects are well developed at each stage and informed by research and best practices.
- The Second Chance reauthorization expands its impact by adding nonprofit organizations to allowable grantees for grants for programs promoting family-based substance abuse treatment and career training.
- The bill repeals several provisions calling for studies that have been completed and removes support for programs for which other funding sources have been identified. It also consolidates the reentry court program into the Adult and Juvenile Offender State and Local Demonstration projects.

The Second Chance Reauthorization Act reduces Bureau of Prison costs and saves taxpayer dollars by improving federal reentry policy.

- While the United States is home to only 5% of the world's population, it is responsible for 25% of the world's prison population. This has led to prison overcrowding and out-of-control spending on corrections in the United States, without a correlation in public safety. Currently, the Department of Justice spends over 25% of its budget on the Bureau of Prisons – this is money that would otherwise be spent on other programs like federal investigators and prosecutors, and support for state and local governments.
- The Second Chance Reauthorization Act attempts to address the expanding prison population by continuing the Elderly and Family Reunification for Certain Non-Violent Offenders Pilot Program and modestly expands the pool of eligible inmates.

The Second Chance Reauthorization Act promotes accountability.

- The bill requires periodic audits of grantees to ensure that federal dollars are responsibly spent. Grantees with unresolved audits will not be eligible for funding.

The story of a saint is always a love story. It is a story of a God who loves, and of the beloved who learns how to reciprocate and share that "harsh and dreadful love." It is a story that includes misunderstanding, deception, betrayal, concealment, reversal, and revelation of character. It is, if the saints are to be trusted, our story. But to be a saint is not to be a solitary lover. It is to enter into deeper community with everyone and everything that exists.

Kenneth Woodward
Making Saints

National Ex–Offender Re–entry Program (NREP): A Partnership

By: Paul Graham

Our country’s mass incarceration system is one of the largest drivers of poverty, accounting for about 20% of poverty.¹ This is a system that costs states billions to operate, ravishes communities through over policing, leaves victims of crime wanting, and criminalizes people in ways that bar formerly incarcerated from employment, housing, and citizenship. The crisis of the mass incarceration system was named in the USCCB’s document, “Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice.” This Bishops’ statement notes: “The challenge of curbing crime and reshaping the criminal justice system is not just a matter of public policy, but is also a test of Catholic commitment.”

This partnership brings together some of the most active parts of the Catholic Church to align around a common purpose of reducing poverty through addressing the systemic barriers returning citizens face when re–entering into a community. St. Vincent de Paul has extensive volunteer networks, whose Vincentian volunteers are grounded in faith and experience. CCHD partners have success in working with faith communities and low–income people to address community issues. These partners include the Social Action office of the diocese and community organizing partners.

The goal of the partnership is to develop the leadership skills of returning citizens and Vincentians to work together to address barriers to re–entry. These partners include local community organizing partners with a history of advocacy on criminal justice reform, the local (Arch)diocese, and the local Society of St. Vincent de Paul. In each city, a great deal of the focus is on building the trust and relationships necessary for successful partnering. Many of the partners have done little previous work together and, although they share the same core values, they have operated very differently with differing cultures. Each partner is committed to the success of the goal, but the first challenge is strengthening the relationships so that the partners can innovate and explore new ideas and opportunities.

Through the funding from CCHD, four cities are hiring organizers and coordinators to drive the partnership and realize the goals – Orlando, Boston, Milwaukee, and Cincinnati. In New Orleans, the partners are using the CCHD resources to form a partnership that will allow the partners to expand their organizational capacity through partnering. Each community has its own context and dynamic, but they all share a common learning curve.

Each St. Vincent de Paul has a solid reputation for serving the poor through dedicated volunteer networks, food pantries and thrift stores, and providing direct aid to those in need. Justice is a mark of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and is reflected in the mission statement. But the practice of justice and organizing is new to each SVdP partner. There is a hunger to learn, but there is also caution in place. This is allowing the partners in each city to share experiences and insights, and is creating strong partnerships. The National Program Coordinator is working directly with each partner in each city to help think through how the CCHD partners and local SVdP societies can work and learn from each other.

National Outcomes:

Developing the leadership and civic capacity of returning citizens: Inspired by principles of Preferential Option for the Poor and Subsidiarity, impacted people can lead and shape the efforts to identify the barriers and work to shift systems so they conspire for people’s success, not their failure. In each state, there is a plan to recruit and train returning citizens and the formerly incarcerated to be at the center of a justice movement. This can allow for re–imagining how service delivery can function in a local community, growing the social capital among returning citizens, and identifying meaningful structural change that can make measurable improvements in people’s lives.

Strategies: Leverage partnerships with other re–entry programs; grow through Vincentian ministry contacts and offices that can invite returning citizens to join advocacy and training opportunities.

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The Diocesan Council of Columbus, OH has been seeking ways that we can work together as a council along with local SVDP conferences to align ourselves with this added vision of National SVDP. Diocesan Council members have either read the *Bridges Out of Poverty* book, or viewed the accompanying videos. After doing so, council members are strongly encouraging Vincentians to make use of the information found within the *Bridges Out of Poverty* constructs to further enhance their conference ministries.

We would like to recommend several possible models through which conference-level education could take place:

1. Individual Conferences could purchase the *Bridges Out of Poverty* video series (\$100) or borrow the video series from the Diocesan Council and present them during one of their bimonthly meetings over a series of 4–5 months. Conferences may choose to open these meetings up to fellow parishioners. This may not only serve as an adult education outreach, but as a method of increasing SVDP membership.
2. Several Conferences within the same Region may choose to join together to view the videos either at a single day seminar or in monthly joint meetings.
3. Diocesan Council will sponsor a one-day seminar to allow Conference Presidents to view the *Bridges Out of Poverty* video series with discussion. Detailed information about the date and location of this training will be forthcoming shortly.
4. The Diocesan Council would also be willing to offer additional single day seminars if Vincentians express interest in this option.

The “Bridges Out of Poverty” model takes things a step further than helping others understand poverty and the rules of economic class. They have developed a program called “Getting Ahead in a Just- Getting’- By World: Building Your Resources for a Better Life.” “Getting Ahead” programs (started in 2004) exist in many communities throughout the country and have proven to be an effective way for people in poverty or unstable living

situations to learn ways to begin to take charge of their futures.

National SVDP has suggested that one way SVDP councils/conferences may choose to implement the new systemic change vision is to offer similar programs in our communities either as an outreach of SVDP or as a collaborative effort with existing programs. “Getting Ahead” programs are led by trained facilitators, and individuals participating in the programs are encouraged to work with mentors.

Our hope is that after Vincentians view the *Bridges Out of Poverty* video series they can prayerfully choose to use the knowledge gained in one of several ways:

- Keep doing what we do (home visits, food pantries, stores, etc.) with an increased knowledge base
- Use the knowledge to help identify potential participants for community “Getting Ahead” programs during home visits
- Become mentors for program participants
- Go through training to become a program facilitator

Please prayerfully consider the information above.

“It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.”

— Nelson Mandela

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Metrics: Number of trainings, number of returning citizens trained, number of returning citizens who participate in at least two activities per quarter.

Grow Catholic and Vincentian support on efforts to decrease incarceration or open re-entry opportunities:

Vincentians are in regular relationship with the poor in our communities. Often there to serve the needs of families, Vincentians are also uniquely positioned to demonstrate solidarity with those they serve. This is significant support for returning citizens, who are often marginalized or made irrelevant, often the products of service and policy (opposed to the architects and builders of the community around them). In Ohio, Catholics – from everyday parishioners to the Catholic Conference of Ohio – were critical to the support of statewide reform on collateral sanctions. Growing Catholic engagement on efforts to limit incarceration and its impacts on community is a key outcome for the program.

Strategies: In each city, there are already Catholic parishes that work with CCHD-funded programs and the diocese on re-entry and social justice. This plan seeks to unite Catholics and Vincentians out of solidarity for returning citizens. This can include building joint leadership teams where Vincentians and returning citizens work together, developing specific Vincentian activities that help other Vincentians understand the criminal justice system, Vincentians advocating for the employment of returning citizens, and more.

Metrics: Vincentians that take part in at least two activities a quarter; the demonstrable solidarity of Vincentians (media outreach, public gatherings, etc.)

Shifting policy and system change: As noted, mass incarceration and its collateral sanctions are major drivers of American poverty, accounting for 20% of all poverty. This partnership is successfully shrinking that number dramatically, when major barriers to re-entry are removed and the number of people incarcerated is greatly reduced. Systemic change is then more than better alignment of re-entry programs in a city (although that would benefit a great deal of returning citizens, and

should be considered), systemic change targets local and state barriers that prevent the formerly incarcerated from obtaining good jobs, housing, education, and recovery services. Systemic change should also include targeted issues that drive inequality, such as lack of alternatives for nonviolent offenders. Systemic change also includes allowing returning citizens to participate in public life and democracy. In Florida and Louisiana, returning citizens face severe voting restrictions, with Florida having a near ban on voting for citizens with felony convictions.

Strategies: leadership teams that emerge through the cultivation of Vincentian and returning citizen leaders can partner with policy makers and researchers to help identify possible strategies to improve the quality of life.

Metrics: The public support of a policy (identifying by supporters & endorsers, the shifting of actual policy, the growth of allies)

Impacts: Impacts are the collective results of outcomes and goals of the grant.

Shift the dominant narrative about returning citizens and incarceration: This is more than just the rhetoric around re-entry, but shaping the ideas that drive policy. For decades, tough on crime policies and politics have promoted collateral sanctions and tougher policing and sentences with little in return. Through the organizing of returning citizens and the solidarity of Catholics and Vincentians, this project can shift how communities view and understand the criminal justice system, and go from incarceration and punishment towards a system that embraces transformation and restoration. In Ohio, through similar organizing, there is already a shift in how elected officials and employers engage re-entry.

Growth in Catholics involved in public life and the common good: Through the collective efforts to reduce incarceration and collateral impacts, Vincentians and returning citizens will grow in their faith and build social capital that

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strengthens community. Over time, these strengthened relationships can reweave patterns of relationships so that more Catholics are active in efforts to create economic opportunity and close racial equity gaps.

Movement leadership: This partnership, existing in five states, challenges the field of organizing and service alike. We are on the front edge of a movement that is coming into focus, and the National Re-Entry Program is going to help shape the field of advocacy and organizing on re-entry. We are going to learn a great deal, through both success and failure, and are in a position to share these learnings and expand the field of organizing and re-entry. Already, significant allies and researchers are reaching out to figure out how to partner. There is an excitement for this partnership that positions each of us uniquely to lead in national efforts to reduce re-entry barriers.

Dear Pope Francis,
 I think you are a humble man.
 When you read this letter you will have washed the feet of other kids like me.
 I am writing this letter because you give me hope.
 I know one day with people like you us kids won't be given sentences that will keep us in prison for the rest of our lives.
 I pray for you. Don't forget us.

Written by a young boy at the juvenile detention facility in Los Angeles after hearing about Pope Francis washing the feet of youthful offenders on Holy Thursday, 2013

SMARTER SENTENCING ACT – S. 1410

Sponsors: Senators Mike Lee (R-UT) and Richard Durbin (D-IL)

On January 30, 2014, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee passed S. 1410, the Smarter Sentencing Act, with several important changes and amendments. As amended, S. 1410:

- Saves billions spent on incarcerating nonviolent drug offenders – The bill doesn't repeal mandatory minimum drug sentences, but reduces them. The bill also very narrowly expands the "safety valve" exception so that the lowest-level offenders with negligible criminal records do not receive mandatory sentences. This will save billions of dollars, reduce dangerous overcrowding in federal prisons, and ensure that the Justice Department can continue to provide full funding for law enforcement, victims' services, and reentry.
- Remedies a long-standing racial injustice and strengthens black communities – The bill permits 8,800 federal prisoners (87% of which are black) who are imprisoned for crack cocaine crimes to return to court to seek fairer punishments in line with the Fair Sentencing Act, a unanimously-passed measure that reduced the racially discriminatory disparity between crack and powder cocaine sentences in 2010. Sentence reductions are not automatic, and courts have ably handled similar requests from even larger numbers of people in the past.
- Addresses over-criminalization – The bill requires the DOJ and other federal agencies to compile, and make publicly available on their websites, lists of all federal laws and regulations, their criminal penalties, and the intent required to violate the law. This addresses bipartisan concerns about "over-criminalization," the fear that there are too many federal laws and regulations carrying criminal penalties and insufficient intent requirements.

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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!

Visit us at:

<http://www.vincentianvoice.org/voceofpoor.html>

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- A problem to fix: Adds new mandatory minimum sentences that harm victims – Amendments to the Senate bill added new 5-year minimums for sexual abuse and terrorism offenses and a 10-year minimum for interstate domestic violence. Victims' rights groups oppose the 5- and 10-year minimums for sexual abuse and domestic violence because these sentences make it less likely that victims will report their abusers and get the help they need. These mandatory minimum sentences should be removed before final passage of the bill.

Contact Molly Gill, Government Affairs Counsel, at mjill@famm.org or (202) 822-6700 for more information

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