

# Position Statement on Hunger

## Recommendations by the Voice of the Poor Committee Society of St. Vincent de Paul National Council of the United States

*A common and concrete commitment is urgently needed in which all members of society, both in the individual as well as the international spheres, feel duty-bound to work together in order to actualize the right to food, for failure to do so constitutes a clear violation of human dignity and of the rights which derive from it.*

-Pope Benedict XVI (1)

### Situation

"If we could only get a little food to make it to the end of the month," pleads a desperate mother.

America's landscape is changing. A telling indicator is hunger. Today an estimated 35.5 million people live without dependable access to adequate food in the United States, and four percent (4.6 million) experience very low food security. (2)(3) Forced by economic circumstances, those identified as food insecure is expanding. Included are many families caught in a financial rip tide fueled by the increased cost of living, debt, and wages that just cannot keep up. Parents stretch tight resources the best they can and cut back on meals.

Children eat cereal and water for dinner. Cheap rations filled with empty calories, fat and carbohydrates fill the belly. In dire times, families skip meals. They plead with friends and relatives for help. They do whatever they must to get by. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is often called as a last resort for emergency food. With so many bills to pay (rent, electricity, childcare, transportation...) little is left. Families feel helpless. Children are hungry.

A study by the US Conference of Mayors, reports that 40% of adults requesting emergency food assistance were employed, and in 21 of the 24 cities surveyed, unemployment was cited as a determining factor of hunger.(5) In 2006, 36% of families who received emergency food assistance from a food pantry or kitchen had one or more working members.(4)

Households with children experience food insecurity at almost double the rate as those without. Children comprise approximately one-third of those identified as food insecure (12.6 million). Senior citizens (1.59 million) on fixed incomes are also confronted with survival challenges trying to balance the cost of food and medicine.

The Society's 110,000 U.S. members aid millions of their neighbors in distress providing food vouchers, bags of groceries, hot meals through dining rooms, bag lunches for the homeless, and other forms of emergency food assistance annually. Serving the hungry is an integral part of this service domestically and internationally. No need is foreign to the Society, which operates in 142 countries.

### Message From Our President

*I was hungry and you gave me to eat.  
I was thirsty and you gave me to drink....*

Dear Brother and Sister Vincentians,

Hunger manifests itself in many ways. Hunger affects the productivity and health of workers running on empty. Elderly pensioners scrimp to try to get by. Hungry children are affected with poor concentration, behavior difficulties, and low achievement scores. With adequate nourishment, serious physical, mental, and developmental consequences can be prevented.

As followers of Jesus, the words of our Savior make obvious our responsibility to those who hunger and thirst. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul must be a Voice of the Poor.

Yours in Vincent and Frederic,

### **Our Position**

Made in God's image, every person needs proper sustenance. Adequate food and safe drinking water to nourish the body is a basic right that is essential to the dignity of the human person and to life itself. No person should suffer. Food assistance must work in conjunction with any poverty reduction program.

Agricultural and trade practices must be based on the common good. Government must seriously expand the vision of food, environment, and farming policies beyond a single-dimensional national view to a global vision that takes into account the welfare of local communities, especially those living in hand-to-mouth subsistence economies. The impacts on small family farms and local farmers in third world countries struggling simply to survive must be protected from outside trade practices and other influences that result in untold pain and suffering.

Come you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me... in prison and you visited me.... Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.

Matthew 25:34-40

## Church Teaching

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Jesus taught his disciples to pray by asking the Heavenly Father not for "my" but for "our" daily bread. Thus, he desired every person to feel co-responsible for his brothers so that no one would want for what he needs in order to live. The earth's produce forms a gift which God has destined "for the entire human family."

-Pope Benedict XVI (7)

Basic themes of the Catholic Church speak to the issue of hunger including: life and dignity of the human person, rights and responsibilities, option for the poor and vulnerable, and solidarity.(8) In *For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food* (9), the US bishops reiterated that a primary goal of food and agricultural policy should be providing basic food and nutrition for all. In *Food Policy in a Hungry World* (10) the bishops called for strengthening the domestic food assistance programs to ensure that no one in America goes hungry or suffers malnutrition. "When the economy fails to provide the jobs and income necessary to prevent hunger and malnutrition, the various local, state, and national food assistance programs must be funded and expanded to provide food to all in need." The US Bishops have also made protecting God's creation a goal of agricultural policies, and call for farm subsidy policy that supports small and medium sized family farms here and abroad.

**The fact that starvation is still a brutal reality in a world with the technical capacity to feed everyone touches all of us. Something is basically wrong when hunger still haunts the richest nation on earth, when thousands of family farmers who produce our food cannot sustain their own families and keep their farms, and when public policy seems designed to promote and reward the biggest and richest farmers at the expense of smaller and more moderately sized farms, for which the original programs were intended.**

-*Food Policy in a Hungry World*, a Pastoral Letter of the US Bishops (11)

Pope Benedict XVI (12) described hunger as a "scandal" and a "scourge" in the world. Indicating that though the situation of hunger is repeatedly renounced, "it shows no sign of a solution and indeed, in some respects is worsening." FAO data show vast numbers around the world who "live in a condition of undernourishment" and especially children who die of hunger. Pope Benedict called for the elimination of the "the structural causes linked to the system for regulating the world economy." To be effective on a wide scale, it is necessary 'to convert' the model of global development, required not only due to the scandal of hunger but also by environmental and energy emergencies. He called every person and every family to action "to alleviate hunger in the world by adopting a lifestyle and consumption compatible with the safeguarding of creation and with criteria of justice for those who cultivate the land in every country."

**Charity must be expressed in a *charity that is universal*-a charity that seeks to bring about a world that is "more human towards all people, where all will be able to give and receive, without one group making progress at the expense of the other.**

-Pope Benedict XVI (13)

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### ***The Society gives immediate help but also seeks mid-term and long-term solutions.***

Rule of the International Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Part 7.1

Part 7.5 of the Rule of the International Confederation of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul calls members to be a voice for the voiceless. **"The Society helps the poor and disadvantaged speak for themselves. When they cannot, the Society must speak on behalf of those who are ignored."** Councils and Conferences of the Society are asked to support and encourage international, federal, state, county, city, and private efforts to provide meaningful food assistance for the most vulnerable. Councils can take proactive measures to stand in solidarity with the poor by collaborating with the Vincentian family, the Catholic Church, and community-based groups on specific food insecurity issues. Vincentians must call for what is fair, decent, and just.

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Make us responsive to the Christian calling to seek and find the forgotten, the suffering, and the deprived so that we may bring them your love. Perfect in us your love and teach us to share in the Eucharistic sacrifice offered for all.

**Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. Have mercy on us.**

**Immaculate Heart of Mary. Pray for us.**

**St. Vincent de Paul. Pray for us.**

## Addressing US Hunger

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*The Society of St. Vincent de Paul supports:*

- **EMPOWERMENT. We support adequate funding for health and nutrition programs that serve food insecure individuals and families. While headway has been made (14), more is needed.**
  - Strengthen the Food Stamp Program, now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, to better assist the working poor and elderly.
  - Extend Food Stamp eligibility to more single adults and more working families.
  - Protect funding for essential food programs that serve low-income families, such as The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and the Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP).
  - Base monthly benefits on an updated measure of what families need, such as options that provide access to more nutritious food.
  - Allow families to participate without forfeiting the opportunity to save.
  - Ensure that federal nutrition programs meet the unique needs of low-income rural families.
  - Aid with simple sanitation basics, such as soap. (Personal cleanliness is important for health.)
  - End the five-year waiting period for adult legal immigrants who in a time of need would otherwise be eligible for food stamps.
  - Repeal the current provision penalizing low-income families headed by a parent (usually a single mother) with a past drug conviction.
- **ACCESS. Food assistance programs need to be easily accessible to those who qualify.** This includes:
  - Outreach improvements that reduce the complexity and stigma in the application process.
  - Promote outreach efforts at national, state, and local levels.
- **EDUCATION. We support stepping up education efforts regarding eligibility along with simple registration procedures to those eligible for food assistance programs.**
  - Provide adequate education (e.g. based on the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and current infant feeding practice guidelines of the American Academy of Pediatrics).

## Addressing World Hunger

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The eradication of extreme poverty and hunger must be a priority. It is the responsibility of individuals, communities, and nations to work together. The United Nations' eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) (15) include cutting extreme poverty in half, halting the spread of HIV/AIDS, providing gender equality, reducing childhood mortality, improving maternal health, ensuring environmental sustainability, providing universal primary education, and developing a global partnership for development by the target date of 2015. These goals form a blueprint agreed to by all the world's countries and all the world's leading development institutions. Yet limited headway has been made to bring these goals to reality.

*The Society of St. Vincent de Paul supports:*

- **Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger by 2015.**
  - Prompt and effective emergency funding of food programs to alleviate immediate suffering is critical. This includes quickly responding to the newly hungry in disasters.
  - Flexibility is needed to allow the use of currency or commodities in fighting hunger abroad.
  - Agricultural development assistance. Increase U.S. support to assist developing countries to further their investments in research, extension, rural infrastructure, and market access for poor small farmers.
- **Encourage global leaders to work together to investigate and promulgate realistic solutions with special attention given to the 1.1 billion who live in extreme poverty in this world making less than \$1 a day.**
  - World leaders must make food sufficiency and adequate access to safe, nutritious food a global priority. Without adequate sustenance, the poor cannot hope to care for themselves or their families. By embracing the least with a network of charity, the entire world reaps abundant benefits.
  - The economics and ethics of subsidies, such as food for fuel, must take into account the most vulnerable and make feeding the poor and hungry a priority.
  - Global leaders, both public and in private industry, must focus on the mitigation of circumstances that affect safe food and drinking water, along with agricultural self-sufficiency of the poor. The promotion of sustainable agricultural practices that protect farmland, natural resources, and wildlife for future generations is everyone's responsibility.
  - US farm subsidy program practices that do not comply with international trade obligations and disadvantage poor farmers in developing countries must be eliminated.

## Federal Food Assistance Programs

One in five Americans receives food assistance through federal nutrition programs annually. These federal programs (16) form an indispensable safety net, particularly for children, older adults, and at-risk families that emergency food alone cannot provide. Because programs are reauthorized, they can be rewritten, affecting the number of persons who can be helped and the amount and type of assistance provided.

Funding cycles for programs vary. For example, the **Food Stamp Program** (17) now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is a *mandatory* (or entitlement) program authorized by Congress and funded every five years through the Farm Bill. It is not subject to annual appropriations. The Farm Bill governs federal farm and food policy and has a profound influence on people and the environment.

Other food and nutrition programs, like the **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)** (18), are *discretionary* (not mandated by law) and subject to annual appropriations allocated by Congress. WIC offers healthy food, nutrition education, and health services for low-income new and expecting mothers and their young children.

Food distribution programs help to strengthen the nutrition safety net through commodity distribution and other nutrition assistance to low-income families, emergency feeding programs, Indian Reservations, and to the elderly. For example, children can receive nutritious food through USDA distribution programs such as the **National School Lunch Program** (19), the **Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** (20), the **School Breakfast Program** (19), and the **Summer Food Service Program** (19).

Commodity food distribution programs provide vital sustenance for the most vulnerable. **The Commodity and Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)** (21), provides food packages to low-income pregnant women, breastfeeding women, new mothers, infants, children up to age 6, and elderly persons above 60 years of age. (People cannot participate in both CSFP and WIC at the same time.) Another USDA program is **The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)** (22) which makes commodity foods available to food banks and soup kitchens through states and local agencies, allowing low-income needy people, including the elderly, to receive emergency food and nutrition assistance at no cost.

There are other types of federal assistance, such as, the **Emergency Food and Shelter Program (EFSP)** (23), administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), to provide emergency help. EFSP is entrusted through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (PL 100-77) “to supplement and expand ongoing efforts to provide shelter, food and supportive services” for the nation’s hungry, homeless, and people in economic crisis.

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