In Attendance: David Anderson, Randy Bedore, Dave Busch, Armand Carriere, Jim Erven, Michael Howden, Tom Jozwik, E. Michael McCann, John Weber, with Linda Vargo for Ozaukee county, and Bob Hartzheim for Fond du lac county.

Call to Order: The Chairperson opened the conference call at 9:01am and waited for others to connect. The meeting was called to order at 9:10am with the Opening Prayer of the Society.

Minutes: The minutes from the VOP meeting held on December 11, 2021 were reviewed. The December minutes were accepted by the members on a unanimous voice vote.

Subcommittee Updates:

Energy – Dave Busch reported that Wisconsin Electric Power Co., doing business as We Energies, filed a 2022 fuel cost plan on June 1, 2021, with the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (PSCW). The plan includes an increase of $29.4 million (3.51%) in the form of a fuel cost adjustment to cover expected 2022 fuel costs. The primary driver for the increase is higher prices for purchased power. The monthly impact of the fuel cost adjustment on individual customer bills will vary depending on the customer rate class and amount of electricity used. Residential customers can expect to see a 0.8 to one percent increase on their bill, general secondary customers (small businesses using about 2,000 kWh per month) can expect a 1.04 percent increase and primary customers (large businesses) can expect to see a 1.34 percent increase on their bill, according to WE Energies. The Wisconsin Public Service Commission will determine the amount of increase allowed and will hold public hearings on the proposal. The Citizens Utility Board is studying the rate filing case and will offer alternate proposals during these hearings. Utility rate increases tend to hurt the poor more, but this case appears to be a modest proposal. Busch will monitor the findings from CUB and report back to our committee.

Criminal Justice: E. Michael McCann reported that AB185, relating to prosecuting or adjudicating delinquent a person under the age of 18 for committing an act of prostitution has still not received any action on it. The bill has some bipartisan support also has widespread support by social service and government agencies, as well as the Badger State Sheriffs Association and the Wisconsin Bar Association, and McCann believes this is a good bill worthy of our support. Under this bill, a person who is under the age of 18 may not be prosecuted or adjudicated delinquent for committing an act of prostitution.

Next, McCann reported on the effort to change the Wisconsin law on charging and trying juveniles under the age of 18 as adults. The change in the law was included in Governor Evers Budget proposal for the next biennium, but was removed from the bill by the majority party’s leadership. Many states had allowed juveniles to be tried as adults but have since changed their laws back to
prohibit this. Wisconsin is one of only three states that allow 16 and 17 year old’s to be charged as adults. This bill has yet to be reintroduced in the legislature, and it now looks as though it will not get any play during the current session and will need to be re-introduced in 2023.

Next, Mike told us that AB329 received its first required public hearing on October 28th. This bill requires the Department of Justice to collect information from law enforcement agencies and prepare an annual report to the legislature about the issuance of search warrants and the use of no-knock or unannounced entries upon execution of search warrants. The bill requires the warrant report to specify action on unannounced searches in great detail. Widespread thought on this bill is that the increased scrutiny of “no-knock” warrants will lead to reduced use of these warrants. The bill has passed the Assembly but no actions have been scheduled on this by the Senate.

McCann also reported that Republican Assembly leader Robin Voss held a press conference with several representatives of law enforcement agencies to propose introducing a number of bills to use funds from the federal pandemic infrastructure funds to recruit, train and retain law enforcement officers throughout the state. The problem with the Voss proposal is that the federal pandemic money is under the control of state Governors.

Health Care - Marian Lamoureux was not able to attend this meeting so discussion on HealthCare was limited to the local news regarding the pandemic.

Dave Busch reported that as of Friday January 7th, Wisconsin recorded a record-breaking number of new COVID-19 cases, driven by the highly contagious but milder omicron variant. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services reported 12,293 new confirmed cases, the highest single-day case count of the entire pandemic. The previous record was set on Thursday when 11,547 new cases were reported. Friday’s seven-day average was more than double what it was just two weeks ago, the health department said. At 7,637 cases, the 7-day rolling average was also the highest of the pandemic.

On Thursday, 97% of intensive care unit beds and 98% of immediate care beds in Wisconsin were full. A total of 2,109 people were in the hospital with COVID-19 on Friday (Jan. 7) — still below the November 2020 peak of 2,277, according to the Wisconsin Hospital Association. The number of ICU patients — 472 — was just shy of the pandemic all-time high of 475 reached just the day before, on Thursday, according to the association. Busch ended the report by stating that the CDC still recommends social distancing, wearing a face mask and getting vaccinated are still the best ways we can slow the spread of the virus and reduce the number of deaths during this pandemic.

David Anderson added that the day before this meeting, he had attended a funeral for a long-time St. Leonard’s Parish member who was 73 years old and passed away due to complications from contracting COVID-19 and was NOT vaccinated.

Armand Carriere reported that the Milwaukee Area Council of Churches, a protestant organization, has recommended churches go back to online, virtual services. Armand also hoped that the Archdiocese would take a stronger stand and at least recommend the use of face masks in church.

Randy Bedore noted that the Shorewood community has one of the highest vaccination rates in Wisconsin. At the same time, the Shorewood school district has one of the highest rates of COVID cases in the state.

Mike McCann stated that he knows of two parishes that have a separate section in the church reserved for those that choose not to wear masks. Others reported that their parishes offer one mass each Sunday exclusively for persons wearing a face mask.
Housing: Rose Lue-Hing was unable to attend this meeting due to her wait for a new phone to be installed. John Weber reported on an effort by Republicans to recruit and keep workers in Wisconsin. Faced with the fact that many municipalities lack attractive and moderately priced housing for workers at the lower end of the pay scale, Republicans introduced a package of bills promoting affordable workforce housing grants to municipalities. Most of these bills passed the state Assembly unanimously, and are awaiting action by the Senate. AB 605, which requires subdivisions to use a certain portion of moneys received from the federal American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, toward workforce housing projects, passed along a party line vote. “Workforce housing” is defined as housing that is affordable to persons earning between 60 percent to 120 percent of the state’s median household income. The target of these bills are middle income employees in the areas of law enforcement, retail sales, manufacturing, education and health care. It is worth noting that Governor Evers original budget proposal contained a provision to allocate 70 million dollars to fight homelessness and included 50 million dollars for workforce housing grants to municipalities. The majority party leaders who gutted this money from Evers budget proposal, went on to introduce similar bills of their own. Weber also reported that the city of Milwaukee just received an additional 61 million dollars in rental assistance money in addition to the 50 million it originally received from the federal American Rescue Plan funds. Busch speculated that this abundance of funding might account for the lack of requests for rent help this past year. A number of other VOP members have also reported a reduction in the number of calls for rent help from their Conference, even as eviction filings are rising. Weber closed by reminding us that in Milwaukee, citizens can apply for rental assistance by calling the Social Development Commission at 414-906-2700 or go to the SDC web site at https://www.cr-sdc.org/services/mera

Food/hunger: Tom Jozwik was unable to attend this meeting so discussion on this topic was tabled until the next meeting.

Immigration: Armand Carriere reported on continuing efforts to place Afghani refugees staying temporarily at Fort McCoy near Sparta, Wisconsin. The number of refugees currently being housed at Fort McCoy has been reduced to approximately 6,500 (down from 8,000 as of last month) In November, the rate of resettlement was reported to be about 400 per month. After the holidays the resettlement rate was listed as approximately “10 per day” which would equal 300 per month or more. Not too far of the mark considering the holiday time period. The target for resettlement of refugees in Wisconsin remains at about 400. It was noted that Afghan refugees from other temporary military camps are sending families to Wisconsin. The International Institute of Wisconsin (IIWis) and Lutheran Social Services (LSS) in Milwaukee remain the only agencies in the greater Milwaukee area working directly with refugees on resettlement. IIWis has placed 164 families and LSS reports placing 71 families statewide. Hanan Refugee Relief Group (HRRG), a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization registered with the IRS, is a Milwaukee Muslim Community based group that recently began working on Afghan refugee resettlement. Their group consists of dedicated volunteers that joined together for the sole purpose of aiding refugees and people in need. Catholic Charities of Milwaukee is no longer accepting clothing donations for the Afghan refugees but they are still in need of volunteers who can spend time working directly in person with the
refugees at Fort McCoy. Donations of your time (or money) may be coordinated with Andrew Ruesch, Afghan Refugee Coordinator at 414-769-3543 or aruesch@ccmke.org.

Although Catholic Charities is no longer serving as a refugee resettlement agency they will continue to work with refugees through their Refugee and Immigration Services office (www.risccmke.org/en). They provide most of this assistance in the form of advice, as refugees seek legal immigrant status and ultimately, citizenship.

Lastly, Armand reported that Marquette University Law students have been donating their time to refugees at Fort McCoy in filling out the proper documents needed for their immigration process. Three groups of students, totaling about ten percent of the law school’s total enrollment, have spent a week at a time working with the refugees in person. The goal is to prepare the refugees for the actual process of seeking the appropriate immigration status. However, the official process cannot begin until the immigrants have a permanent place of residence.

Randy Bedore reported that his conference is working with two Afghan families that have relocated to the Riverwest neighborhood from out of state. Randy stated that the International Institute agency that is involved in settling these people from out of state is overwhelmed by the process. The contact for IIWIS in our area is Brian Scherschel; you can contact him at 812-606-6602, or email bscherschel@iiwisconsin.org if you or your Conference are interested in helping. Primary funding is from State dept. Each ‘unit’ of refugee (single, brothers or sisters, or family) gets an account of funds to spend for startup, including rent, beds, appliances, household items, or clothing. The State Department demands that agencies who do resettlements, make certain that the refugee is properly outfitted, or can be so, before sending the refugee to their end destination. Even the State Department is overwhelmed with the refugee process because the Resettlement Division had been gutted by the Trump Administration. This has caused a major loss of people experienced in resettlements, at the State Department.

**Human Trafficking** – The Committee is looking for another member that may be interested, passionate, or knowledgeable on the subject of Human Trafficking and willing to report on this topic in future meetings. Discussion was tabled until the next meeting.

Randy Bedore mentioned that Anne Haines, who used to act as liaison for the VOP and the Milwaukee Bishops, now serves as the Executive Director/Episcopal Representative at Urban Initiative Milwaukee, has helped to open St. Bakhita House. The house, located at 3138 North 2nd Street in Milwaukee, is a Catholic Worker House that is teaching and practicing the Beatitudes and providing a supportive community for women escaping the exploitation of human sex trafficking. They have now moved their Grand Opening date for St. Bakhita House to May First, the feast day of St. Joseph the Worker and the birthday of the Catholic Worker Movement.

**Labor/Minimum Wage** – Dave Busch reported that there has been zero progress on a bill to raise the Minimum Wage in Wisconsin. AB477 and its companion bill in the Senate SB452, were read into the record, then sent to the Committee on Labor and Integrated Employment.

Both bills support raising the state minimum wage for most employees to $10.15 per hour on the effective date of the bill, then to $15 per hour one year after the effective date of the bill. Busch reported that no Republicans have signed on to cosponsor this bill so it is not likely to have any action taken on it during the current session and will need to be reintroduced again in 2023.

**Racine Update:** Jim Erven reported that work is progressing on the Racine Council’s new Thrift Store, located at 2118 Rapids Drive in Racine. The space is undergoing final renovations before they can open for business, but progress towards opening the store has been slowed down a bit due to supply chain issues. Their contractors report that they are facing shortages of fixtures and the materials needed to build out shelving and countertops, and are also having problems keeping their equipment in good repair, due to parts shortages. This puts the Racine Council in a position
of having to reforecast the stores’ grand opening. They planned to open early this spring, but are now hoping for a late spring or early summer opening. Their contractors are also reporting problems with finishing other projects that started ahead of the Racine Thrift Store. This is making it difficult for the contractors to make any promises to the Council regarding the finish of the Thrift Store project. Jim also mentioned that the Racine Council is soliciting help from Vincentians in their area that have retail store operations experience, in an effort to help the Council draft “best practices” for the new store.

Bob Hartzheim reported that they are at work on building a homeless shelter in Fond du Lac and due to the pandemic caused delays in the supply chain, their Council adopted a policy of ordering building materials they needed, with three to four times above the normal expected wait times. In most cases this proved to be the trick that helped keep their project close to schedule.

Linda Vargo added that the National SVDP has a new head of the Thrift Store Committee and she has been actively emailing Thrift Store managers and coordinators in an effort to re-energize the store operations by engaging managers from across the country to network with each other. Linda stated that she will try to forward one of these emails to Jim so he could share the contact information with his Thrift Store group.

Lastly, Erven reported that the Racine Council is about to begin working on a new round of strategic planning. They are at the end stages of their last plan and are looking forward to drafting a new five year plan for their district.

Waukesha Update: David Anderson reported that Waukesha SVDP Society’s Project Angel Tree was started back up this year. They were able to successfully provide Christmas gifts to 46 children from 23 different families, where one of the parents might be incarcerated. Next, Anderson reported that all of the homeless shelters in Waukesha have been full to capacity this winter. Fortunately, the SVDP overflow shelter is scheduled to open on Jan 15. The shelter on Sunset Drive on the northwest side of Waukesha will be open from 7pm to 7am and has separate areas for women with children, separate from single men, separate from single women. David mentioned that he is investigating getting leftover food from the Food Pantry in Muskego delivered to the overflow shelter.

Lastly, Anderson told us about an upcoming Ozanam Orientation session to be held at St. Williams Parish Hall on Moreland Road. Training will be held on Saturday, March 5th from 8:30am to 1:30pm. Registration begins at 8am.

Old Business:

SVDP Wis. Expungement Bill on Voter Voice – Dave Busch reported that SVDP State Coordinator Jim Penczykowski from the Madison Council has gotten approval from the Green Bay and Madison diocese on the VOP’s use of VoterVoice to promote the Wisconsin Expungement of Records bill. Jim is still working on getting the approval the Superior and La Crosse Council Presidents to move this project forward. Jim has also gotten approval from our SVDP Regional Vice President. Busch thought that we will need to put our position on this bill into written form, in order to make it easier to get the approval we need from the Milwaukee Archdiocese Executive Board. Mike McCann agreed to author this letter and Busch greed to help edit this and present it to the Executive Board at their next meeting on February 5th.

Mike reminded us that time is of the essence as the current legislative session ends in June. He also reviewed the reasons that make this bill a reasonable choice to pass; wide bipartisan support, supported by a variety of law enforcement and social service agencies, supported by the Catholic Bishops, etc. Busch will continue to coordinate with Jim in Madison and report back to this committee on our progress.
Gerrymandering in Wisconsin – Dave Busch updated us on lawsuits filed over Wisconsin’s voting district lines. The Wisconsin legislature petitioned the US Supreme Court to intervene in the fight for fair voting district lines after the Wisconsin Supreme Court voted against making any substantive changes to the current district maps. On December 6, The U.S. Supreme Court denied the Wisconsin Legislature's petition to declare that federal court intervention in redistricting violates principles of federalism and comity. The U.S. court’s decision assures that the strong Republican bias in Wisconsin’s congressional map will survive another decade, and it is likely the final decision on this matter.

New Business:

Catholic Social Justice Ministry Gathering – Dave Busch reported that Rob Shelledy had sent out information on the virtual social justice gathering being held on Sat. Jan 29 thru Tues. Feb 1. The Catholic Social Ministry Gathering (CSMG) brings together people from around the country working to combat hunger, poverty, and injustice at home and around the world. This year, we will pray, learn, and advocate together on our Catholic vision for the post-pandemic world and call to bring justice to the margins.
This year’s virtual gathering will include:
- Inspiring leading voices in Church and society.
- Workshops with policy experts and grassroots community leaders.
- Resources from dozens of Catholic social ministry organizations.
- And much more.
Rob Shelledy has access to some limited scholarship funds for this event and can refund you the $50 individual attendance fee. Contact Rob by email at shelledyr@archmil.org if you are interested in attending.

New “Water Assistance” program - available for low income households. Dave Busch reported that a new Low Income Household Water Assistance Program is offering $18 million to Wisconsin households in need of water utility assistance. The money is from broader pandemic-related rental assistance funds, which were released for the first time in December.
In order to be considered for the water assistance program, households need to qualify for the Wisconsin Home Energy Assistance Program. The program has several eligibility requirements, such as household income, household size, the household's water and utility burden.
You can apply to the home energy assistance program through their webpage, or by calling Impact 211 or 1-800-506-5596.

Next Meeting: Our next meeting will be held online, on the second Saturday in February, using your phone or computer, on February 12, 2022 at 9am.
The link to the next Zoom Meeting is found at the bottom of this document.

Adjournment: The meeting was formally adjourned at 10:53am, with all members praying together for a Blessed New Year.
“Last year is gone and with it all the mistakes I have made.
Lord, I am eager to put the past behind and to move forward toward the mark of knowing you, loving you, serving you, and making Your name known in this coming year.
Link to our next Virtual Zoom Meeting

The St. Vincent de Paul Society of Milwaukee is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom teleconference meeting for the Archdiocesan Council Voice of the Poor Committee, on the second Saturday of each month, at 9 am.

Join Zoom Meeting: https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84435969715?pwd=WFN2NIhV1c1SVpqd2l1RG5oVkJyUT09

Meeting ID: 844 3596 9715
Passcode: 1234

Or call in: 312-626-6799