



Vincentine Health Care Witness Shows Advocacy Works *But Many Challenges Remain* October 5, 2017

Can I Get a Witness? At least in the case of health care advocacy for the poor and marginalized, the answer was a resounding “Yes” as faith-based leaders and groups, including the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and its leadership, combined their voices together to help preserve health care coverage for poor and vulnerable fellow citizens.



Unable to muster the votes necessary in the final days before the September 30th close of the Federal fiscal year, the Senate opted not to bring the latest iteration of “repeal and replace” legislation for the Affordable Care Act to the floor. For the time being then, federally guaranteed health care coverage for the poor and needy, the very persons we see in our home visits and special works, remains in place.

That all these attempts dating back to January 2017 to roll back coverage for millions of Americans failed is due in no small measure to the power of the voices and witness of the faith-based community. Advocacy works, notes past Society President Sheila Gilbert, and our Vincentians need to know that.

In multiple ways, Vincentians responded to Sheila’s call to seek justice for our friends in need. Hundreds sent letters to their senators through the [Vincentine VoterVoice online electronic advocacy platform](#) and added their names to an [Interfaith Healthcare Coalition letter to Congress](#). That letter alone gathered from all 50 states more than 3,000 signatures, including that of new incoming Society President Ralph Middlecamp, outgoing President Gilbert, and of hundreds of other members of the Vincentine Family.

Sheila signed the Society’s name on to other interfaith letters opposing coverage rollback during the many months this on-going national debate was percolating in Congress. She also offered quotes for national press releases that brought to the forefront the special Vincentine perspective of the health care needs of those we see in our ministry. Across the country, individual Vincentians met with their Congressional officials and staff to express their concerns, attended rallies, signed on to op-ed pieces for newspaper and affixed their names to public service advertisements in newspapers.

But advocacy – or, phrased another way, justice seeking – is not a one-time event. Just as we continually provide charity to those in need, we also seek justice for them by continually offering our personal witness and voice.

Indeed, the question of whether all citizens are entitled by virtue of their human dignity – the fact that they are created in the image and likeness of God – to health care coverage regardless of economic station in life is far from settled in our country. Many in our country's leadership have promised to continue seeking wholesale changes in the Affordable Care Act rather than the incremental improvements and enhancements to the Act that the Society and many other faith-based communities see as necessary and highly desirable.

On the near horizon are other challenges for justice-loving people. Proposals to change the federal tax laws and regulations could exacerbate the dramatic income inequality already present, further crippling those struggling to just get-by. Proposed payday lending reforms and consumer financial protection provisions which safeguard the shaky finances of the working poor are threatened. Comprehensive immigration reform, including protection for the dreamers (the children brought here illegally by their parents), is still a crying need dividing our country and causing untold grief to the poor, vulnerable and marginalized. The list goes on.

Just a few days ago, at the first Annual Social Justice Conference of the St. Louis Archdiocese, keynoter Reverend Starsky Wilson of the United Congregational Church and co-chair of the Ferguson Commission, asked the 300 Catholics assembled whether they were prepared to be “witnesses” in the fight for social justice and equality. “Justice” he said, “is the sound of worship in public.”

If there are enough voices and witnesses, faith-based advocacy truly does work. Indeed, it is so powerful that it can overwhelm special interest and self-serving lobbying because it calls upon the best in us and is rooted in Jesus's call to care for our fellow man and seek the common good.

*This Voice of the Poor Witness Perspective was prepared by Tom Dwyer, Chair, National Voice of the Poor Committee.
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