



NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE US SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

A Letter From Your Servant Leaders

A family member spent a few weeks this year helping the government to complete the U.S. Census. This involved going to addresses that either declined or ignored the many mailings, ads, and emails to send in their Census forms. Local governments depend on the Census to receive federal fund allocations based on population and socioeconomic data, so every household counts.

Listening to her stories of daily interactions with people who often live in the most challenging parts of her community, I can't help but draw parallels to our Vincentian Home Visit experiences and what we learn from these relationship-building encounters.

For example, quite a few people don't want to give any information to a Government worker, not even their names, ages, or ethnicities. They may be afraid to share their Social Security numbers or other, more private, information although that isn't even requested to get a completed Census record. Contrast this to an average Home Visit encounter where the people we meet sometimes want to tell us everything about their life, present and past! With photos!

In a Census transaction, the worker first has to find the respondent. They don't answer the door, or they may slam it when they see the worker's ID. When asked on the street if they live in the home they are exiting, some deny it – often vigorously! In a Home Visit, we are invited inside.

Some Census respondents mischaracterize how many people live in the dwelling. Granted, it may be confusing presently to define "living here" from "staying here" especially in times of COVID and high unemployment. A respondent simply may not want the landlord or others to know that their extended family is living in the one-room apartment. Meanwhile at our food pantry, people in need count on their fingers how many are staying in their home this week.

Even a conscientious government worker trying to help people may be branded as distrustful. We are blessed as Vincentians to have a reputation of being trustworthy and helpful, often even before we meet someone new! It is so much more than the promise of providing financial assistance during a Home Visit. Maybe it's because we represent the Catholic Church in that person's eyes, and the Church is still loved and respected despite its recent scandals. Maybe it's because they or their family have been helped by the Society in the past, or someone they trust recommended us to them for help.

We recognize that Home Visits, food pantries, and other Society encounters are much more than transactions with people in poverty. Rather, they are human, caring relationships with our neighbors. Each visit creates a new relationship, but it also grows our total relationship within an entire community and even globally. I often wear a jacket with our logo on it or my Society pin. People stop and tell me about their family that was once helped and are now doing fine. They tell me about their relative who is one of our members (and then I ask them to join us as well!) They tell me about how they help out once in a while or see others in their Parish doing so. Or they simply say "God Bless your guys' work." I doubt that government workers hear this very often.

The U.S. Census is an important tool and provides great benefits to our country. Census workers and the system see people and families in the aggregate. Vincentians see them one person, one family at a time. This makes all the difference.

National Council of the United States Society of St. Vincent de Paul

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Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Dave B." followed by a stylized flourish.

Dave Barringer
CEO