

Notes from 9/15/20 Vincentian Forum:

Serving Neighbors and Retaining Our Vincentian Charism During COVID-19

Recommendations for conducting “home” visits virtually (phone visiting)

What makes “home phone visits” so difficult is the absence of all the usual visual and auditory clues that we take for granted during an in-person visit. Many agreed the biggest obstacle while conducting a visit by phone is the inability to see and read a person’s body language.

Some basic pointers:

1. When someone is “unburdening themselves” and has been talking for some time, it's important to let them know that you are present with some gentle verbal cues (“Uh Huh...”) to signal active listening. Otherwise the neighbor may think they are talking to dead air.
2. Remember that you will probably have to share more of yourself and your experiences than you are used to (in order to get a neighbor to warm up and share).
3. Have all of your resource lists together in one place before you start your calls (physical printouts, windows and tabs in your browser etc.).
4. Have a “cheat sheet” with a number of good “open ended questions” designed to start the conversation and get the neighbor relaxed and talking.
5. The in-person home visit was something that was energizing and rewarding. This energy and uplift needs to be a high priority for finding ways to approach virtual visits.

Suggested open-ended questions/ice breakers:

- What’s the biggest change in your life due to Covid-19? How are you coping in the midst of this pandemic?
- What was your job before all this hit? What did you like about your job? What are the prospects of getting it back? (If they didn’t like their job and/or prospects are bad -) What other kind of work are you interested in?
- (For Parents) How are you coping with the kids and Zoom/remote learning? What do you find difficult about that?
- How is your family doing/coping? How are your neighbors doing/coping?
- Be prepared and willing to answer any of the above questions yourself!

Some suggestions on the use of technology

- Many people have been taking phone calls alone, but doing it in pairs mirrors the home visit, allowing for two sets of ears and differentiated roles (I.e. notetaker and conversation lead) and helps to create a more conversational environment.
 - Three-way calls are one approach as well as the use of applications such as Zoom, WhatsApp, Facetime, etc. (Reach out to techy conference members, family or council staff if you need some pointers here!)

- If looking to learn new technology, search for information and tutorials on the internet first and then ask to practice with a family member or fellow Vincentian so you can feel confident using it with a neighbor.
- Many neighbors do not have internet and cannot access many of the resource referrals/applications for common programs. Help where you can!

General Reflections and Recommendations for Vincentian Practices in the Pandemic

- Vincentians continue to serve in a variety of ways. Some parishes continue to host meals and distribution events while others are not even meeting for mass. It is important to follow public safety guidelines while approaching potentially risky interactions and to make people feel comfortable with the activities. At the same time many Vincentians have fallen off from their conferences since the virtual transition and it is important that we do not forget about those relationships and connections.
- General Consensus that now more than ever SVdP Conferences need to be networking and connecting/building long term relationships with other social service providers in their area. Vincentians need to start thinking of themselves as “Connectors” to other service providers so as to get force multiplication.
 - This role needs to be something that is collaborative and supported. A collaboration between conference members, neighboring conferences, precincts, and the council with Vincentians embracing the role of connector to a network of services.
- There is currently a need to revisit conference guidelines and any restrictions those guidelines may include with regard to how often a neighbor might be assisted by the conference within a given period. All such rules need to be reviewed on an ongoing basis and adjusted according to the evolving context and need, so far as the conference can afford.
- There is increasing “food insecurity”: Vinnies should never forget to check on a neighbor’s food status and talk up the local food bank.
 - Many conferences have seen a decrease in requests for food, so naming it during your conversation even if it is only as a way to talk up the local food bank is a great place to create a richer and more rewarding discussion.
- There was unanimous agreement that during the pandemic we in SVdP have been serving a different group of people than those whom we usually serve. We all have been struck by how seriously neighbors are taking their obligation to pay their rent at this time. They seem to understand on a visceral level that in many ways their landlords are in the same boat with them. Equally everyone has been generally impressed with the forbearance and compassion of landlords, which is more than just grudging compliance with rent moratoriums.
- While many conferences are fundraising well in the current moment, some fundraising events have been cancelled due to the pandemic. Rather than letting those events drop off, it can be helpful to have a discussion around other ways to raise money for the conference.