

Prayer before heading to client's door:

“Lord Jesus, deepen our Vincentian *spirit of friendship* during this meeting, make us *responsive* to the *Christian* calling to seek and find the *forgotten*, the *suffering* or the *deprived* so that we may *bring them your love*. Help us to be generous with our time, our possessions and ourselves in this mission of charity. Perfect in us your love and teach us to live more fully in the Eucharistic sacrifice for all. AMEN.”

Let JESUS enter through the doorway FIRST.

Important steps when making a home visit with clients:

- **S**ay a prayer, smile and say hello! Introduce yourself by FIRST NAME.
- **A**sk permission to enter his/her home. Ask to eliminate distractions (T.V., radio etc.)
- **I**nquire about his/her situation. Ask open-ended questions.
- **N**otice their needs, of the children, of the household
- **T**alk when given an opportunity, try not to interrupt, if possible
- **V**alue client's dignity. Refrain from giving advice.
- **D**iscuss other options and give resources of which you are aware
- **P**ray with the client - ask first if they would mind your saying a short prayer.

Lastly, thank them for allowing you into their home.

Guidelines for Home Visits and SVDP Team Interaction

1. Spirituality
 - a. Pray prior to entering client residence
 - b. Pray after leaving client residence
 - c. Pray for wisdom and guidance in helping this client
2. Confidentiality
 - a. Home visits are confidential
 - b. SVDP meetings are confidential
 - c. Keep contacts outside of meetings confidential
3. Safety
 - a. Know where you are going
 - b. Make an appointment to visit - if that appointment was arranged several days prior to going, call before arriving
 - c. ALWAYS go with another SVDP member
 - d. Observe surroundings and if possible go during daylight
4. Be humble and respectful
 - a. You are a guest
 - b. You are not there to “fix” them
 - c. Can you see Christ in that person?
 - d. You will need to assess their situation in order to help; DO NOT JUDGE

- e. Picture the person sitting in the meeting, imagine that they are listening to your report of their case
5. Obtain information necessary to help in spiritually sensitive manner
 - a. You may know some advice – this may not be the time to push it
 - b. Greet in honest and respectful manner
 - i. Asking for help is usually embarrassing
 - ii. The gap in financial status between you and your client may be great
 - c. Ask general open ended questions first, take pertinent and obtain other information
 - i. Refer to the SVC intake sheet as a question rather than an assumption
 - “I understand you may be having some trouble with your rent this month – is that right?”
 - “Mr. or Ms. X said that you need some help – can you tell me more about that?”
 - ii. Allow the client to finish their initial story if at all possible – do not interrupt
 - iii. State that there are some things that you might need know or take copies of in order to help and ask if you can have that information
 - “Would it be okay if we talked with your landlord about your rent and late fees?”
 - Can I see your lease agreement?
 - iv. Don’t be so concerned with getting all of the details – this is not an interrogation.
 - v. Include therapeutic statements as you obtain information – be truthful
 - “This must be very hard for you to go through now after being so independent for so long”
 - “ Many people have difficult times once in a while, it doesn’t mean you did anything wrong”
 - vi. Ask for permission to contact further if more information is needed to help.
 - vii. Close home visit with plan for follow-up
 - Confirm best contact time and number
 - Promise only what you are going to do
 - Keep client in loop on developments
 - Let client know when to expect an answer from the conference
6. Approaches to difficult scenarios
 - a. Client talks too much
 - i. Gently interrupt when possible to redirect the time
 - “This is an important issue for you, but we will need to be leaving in the next 10 minutes – let’s see if we can get a handle on this one issue (x) and then we can address that first as the most pressing”
 - If the client is a talker on the phone, state in advance how much time you will have for the home visit
 - b. Client’s needs are overwhelming (undocumented immigrant, no source of income, about to be evicted, disability or illness preventing work)
 - i. Assess situation as best you can

- ii. Restate for client what you have heard
- iii. Address the process by which the Society handles each case
- iv. Explain the guidelines of how the financial support from SVDP is limited. This usually means that we cannot help more than (e.g.) one months rent. Address root of the problem (poor planning, abusive relationship, childcare needs, job skills, health, work performance etc.

Home Visit Tips and Best Practices

MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

- Reassure client that everything you discuss is confidential, but ask them if it is okay for you to talk to other agencies and vendors (i.e.: apartment manager, water company, etc.) on their behalf. If yes, have them sign a Client Release form.
- Explain that you are volunteers. It is important the client to understand that you are not employed by the Society.
- Explain that you are not a trained Social Worker.
- Explain that you are not authorized to promise any financial assistance at that time. You will discuss their situation at the next group meeting and will find out at that time if any financial assistance can be made.
- Explain the financial assistance guidelines set by your Conference. (i.e.: "If we are able to help you this time, we won't be able to provide financial assistance again for 12 months.")
- Tell them when they can expect to hear back from you and contact them when you say you will.

INTERVIEW TIPS

- Ask what caused them to get behind and be a willing listener
- Be friendly and respectful – don't interrogate!
- Do not ask if they are a US citizen but you can ask if they have access to governmental assistance such as food stamps.
- Ask how they intend to cover their expenses next month – make sure their game plan is feasible.
- If the situation deems it, help the client face reality. Try to offer options – do they have family they can move in with until their finances can be stabilized? Be compassionate and understanding of their crisis.

THE SPIRIT OF THE HOME VISIT

Our Lord presents us with opportunities to serve Him by serving those in need. It is not so much the material things that we give that are important as what we bring from our hearts. Take a moment to review and reflect on the eight points which are designed to help us accomplish that.

1. **If you are on a witch hunt, stay home.**

One of our purposes as members of the Society is to bring the love of God to those who are in need. You cannot do this if your personal expectation is that the people you visit are on the take—that they are out to get us for whatever they can. If you believe that the people you are going to visit are going to give you a phony story; if you believe before you actually meet with the people that they are only going to sell the food to get money for cigarettes or alcohol or drugs, then you have prejudged them and shouldn't be participating in the home visit. Our role as helper obliges us to keep as open a mind as possible. Give those we serve the benefit of the doubt—at least until you have heard their story and can make a reasonable as to the validity of the need. And, remember it is the need we are judging—not the person. So, the first ground rule calls for you to judge yourself—not the circumstances, not others. What is your reason for going on the home visit? *If you are on a witch hunt, you have no Vincentian reason for being there so stay home.*

2. **If you are an expert on life, stay home.**

Have you ever heard the comment: I've lived a long, difficult life and I've never had to ask for help? (Better yet, have you said as much?) Some people (Vincentians) have a tendency to feel that they know the answers, they've heard it all before, they know the circumstances, they know what questions will be asked, and they know what they are going to do to resolve the request before the visit occurs. The problem with being an expert is that experts have the answers before the questions are asked. The problem with experts is that they are ready with what needs to be done while the words of the request are still being formed in the mind of the one asking. The problem with experts is that they don't listen. And, listening is exactly what is expected of Vincentians. Vincentians should go on a call with no preset plans in mind. Vincentians should visit those in need with the spirit of servants asking their masters, "What is it that we can do for you?" Our Lord has called out to us. It is He whom we are serving in the person of the poor. We must go to Him humbly asking what it is He seeks. But He does expect us to say "yes" when appropriate and "no" also when appropriate. Be a good listener. *If you are an expert on life, stay home.*

3. **If you cannot smile and be pleasant, stay home.**

Let's face it—everyone has a bad day once in a while. It happens to the worst of us. It happens to the best of us. However, as Vincentians, we represent Christ to those we serve. We must be pleasant, loving, and caring when we encounter those in need. Our Lord asked us to love one another as He loves us. That's a tall order and we need to

represent Him well. What this means is that if you are having a bad day, you can't show it. And, if you can't not show it, stay home. You are doing no one any good—including yourself.

If your normal personality matches the movie title “Grumpy Old Men,” then you shouldn't be going on home visits. Grumpy people never provide those they encounter with feelings of love and renewed hope. Part of what we are doing when we go to those in need is showing them that God cares. He cares so much that He sent us to try to help. *So, if you are a grumpy old man or woman, stay home.*

4. We are responsible for our effort, not our success.

It would be great to point to every home visit that we make and be able to say, “This is one of our finest success stories. We did such and such and it really turned things around for this family. They're doing great now.” Well, in doing a reality check, we know better. We know, in fact, that very few of the families we visit for the first time ever even take the good advice we give them. That's part of human nature and we should not expect much more. So then, what is our role if it is not to change people's lives and get them on the road to heaven? Our role in serving those in need is twofold. First, it is to show those who are in need that God cares about them; He cares so much that He sent us to do what we can to help. Second, our role is to make life a little bit better for them right now, this moment, to give them some hope. If we can do more—that's great. If not, that's okay too.

We are responsible for making the effort to help. We are responsible for our attitudes, for the amount of love we put into the visit, for the amount of love we put into the advice we give. We are not responsible for making it all work. We can give advice but we cannot force those we are trying to help to take the advice and run with it. We cannot place conditions on the help we give—so we should never refuse to help someone because they didn't follow our last advice. Christ asked us to love one another as He loves us. His love is unconditional. Focus on what you can control and that is your effort. You may walk away from a visit feeling like you have made a real difference or you may feel like you were not able to change anything. The impact of what you do today may not show up for months or years. If you are going to make an evaluation of the visit, then evaluate yourself, your effort, the impact of the visit on you, and not whether anything is different for the family you visited. *We are responsible for our effort, not for success.*

5. Judgment—not judgmental!

Every day we are faced with making decisions and every day we make a choice on each one of those decision points presented to us. Some of those choices are good, some are bad and some are inconsequential. We hope for the most part that our decisions are good ones. When we are faced with what our Lord presents to us on our visit to Him (in someone's home), we are asked again to make a decision, a choice, and a judgment.

We are asked to judge the validity of the need and the level of resources that are

available to us. We are asked to listen to what is presented, observe the surroundings, analyze the circumstances, and evaluate what we have to work with. It is the need that is important. We are asked to make a judgment—period.

Don't make your decision based on any one of the many varied lifestyle choices that people make: is the house filthy and the kids as well; does the whole place smell of stale cigarette smoke; do they really need that big screen TV; why does the unwed mother keep getting pregnant? These and a thousand other questions are based on the lifestyle choices and cause us to be judgmental.

We are asked to make good judgments about whether to help or not. We are not to be judgmental about lifestyle choices. It's not easy. We have to deal with mind and heart issues as well as all our life experiences. Our Lord told us to love one another as He loves us. Don't deny someone help because you disagree with how they choose to live. *Make the judgment—don't be judgmental.*

6. Who owns the groceries? Let go!

Letting go is something that has been promoted as a necessary part of maintaining both a good mental and emotional balance. Essentially the saying is "let go, let God!" Within our Vincentian way of life we are asked to do the same thing but from a slightly different aspect.

Oftentimes our members place a tremendously high value on the material things that we give to those in need. Oftentimes we are judgmental about the people we serve based on how they deal with the things we give them. Jesus told us to love one another as He loves us. And, He loves us unconditionally. He doesn't attach any strings to the gifts He gives us. He doesn't ask us to dance to a particular tune in order to receive the gifts He gives out of love. And, He certainly is not going to withhold any future gifts because we didn't care very well for what He gave us in the past.

The same should be applied as Vincentians give their gifts to those in need. There are no strings attached. Our gifts are unconditional. When we give a person or family a bag of groceries, who owns the groceries? They do. When we give a person or family some clothing or furniture, who owns the merchandise? They do. They have ownership. How they handle it, how they dispose of it is their business.

We are asked to make a judgment about the need that is presented to us. We are not asked to be judgmental about the actions of the people we are about to help. Let go. Judge each case on its own merit. "The measure with which you measure will be used to measure you." (Matthew 7:2)

7. Work within the guidelines of the Conference

It has been stated in many ways in many Society of St. Vincent de Paul publications: the basic unit of the Society, the most important unit of the Society, is the Conference. It is the Conference that has the resources. It is the Conference that does the works of charity. It is the Conference that decides what will and what will not be done. In the

United States, all Conferences are run democratically. The group makes all decisions. No individual member has a right to override what the Conference decides. Every Conference establishes a set of guidelines upon which the members may operate as Vincentians. Assuming that the guidelines do not contradict the Rule of the Society, all members of the Conference should understand that the guidelines must be followed.

For example, a Conference guideline may allow for any visiting team to spend up to \$150.00 based on their own evaluation of the need and the circumstances. If more than \$150.00 is needed, then it must be brought back to the Conference for a decision. It would be improper for any visiting team to simply approve payment of or pay a bill for \$220.00.

If the Conference as a group decides not to give any further assistance to a specific family (regardless of reason), it would be wrong for an individual member or visiting team to assist the family in spite of the Conference's decision. All members must work within the guidelines of the Conference.

The visiting team must have confidence in themselves and their decision-making ability. They are being asked to make a decision that will affect not only the person/family they are working with but also the Conference.

8. Your decision is the right one.

The visiting team members are the only ones present to hear the story, to ask the questions, to understand the circumstances and to formulate a resolution to the problem. Their decision is the right one. The only exception to this is if their decision contradicts the Rule of the Society or a prior decision/guideline made by the Conference.

No one within the Conference has a right to criticize the team for the decision they made. Other team members may express other points of view, make suggestions for the client and the team but criticism is out. Our role as Vincentians during the meeting is to bolster, encourage, and assist each other. Always remember: unless you are doing something contrary to you Conference's prior decisions, guidelines or the Rule, your decision is the right one.