

**SOCIAL
JUSTICE**

Vincenpaul
CANADA



The newsletter of
the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul
National Council of Canada
Volume 1 no. 2 - June 2017

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INTRODUCTION

Dear readers,

The format of the Vincenpaul-Canada magazine and of the Changing Times newsletter were modified. We will now publish an electronic version of the Vincenpaul-Canada newsletter. Three editions of this newsletter are attributed to social justice, editions of February, June and October.

Please enjoy this Social Justice edition of Vincenpaul-Canada newsletter of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. I encourage you to submit any articles or comments about social justice that you may have for the next edition. You may also like to join our Facebook page for further discussions. Please help us to grow in our understanding and actions related to social justice.

Sincerely,

*Jim Paddon, Chairperson
Social Justice National Committee*

jpssvp@hotmail.ca

CHAIR REPORT

Dear fellow Vincentians:

I am sure we have all seen the reports and pictures of refugees walking through the harsh winter in order to reach the safe and welcoming lifestyle they so desire. Many travel so far, give up so much, and suffer physically and emotionally just to have the chance to share the type of life that we in Canada have had since our birth. The turmoil in today's world and the long journeys many make certainly attest to the fact that we are all human beings made in God's image. We often hear about the global economy but more important is the global need to address the common good and human dignity that everyone deserves. While some nations talk about building walls that can be both economic and physical, there seems no better time to heed the words of Pope Francis and build bridges.

Building bridges means speaking out against inequality and barriers which keep many from escaping poverty, from leaving tyranny and hopelessness. There has likely never been a more important time than now for the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul to become more active in terms of social justice and actions that can change systems and give real hope to the many fellow global citizens who are simply seeking the life God desires for them.

Please join our social justice family here in Canada. If we can build a bridge constructed from social justice committees at every one of our Councils across Canada we can begin to make a real difference. Therefore, I sincerely ask that every Council (Central or Particular) form a social justice committee which can act as the liaison between our national committee and your member Conferences and parishes. If you currently have such a committee please let us know by providing contact information for the chairperson. If you do not have such a committee please consider forming one. Perhaps there are parishioners who are not members at this time but may have an interest in social justice. Why not invite them to join us. We can also help with resource information and ideas on what a social justice committee can do and how it should function within its Council.

Submitted by

*Jim Paddon, Chairperson
Social Justice Committee*

jpssvp@hotmail.ca

JUST WAGES

In the last issue of Changing Times I wrote about the case for SSVP social justice education. In this issue I offer an example of an educational topic that is based upon Catholic Social Teaching.

An important idea in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is that wages must satisfy the fundamental needs of a worker and family. In 1891 Pope Leo XIII criticized the free market opinion, as common then as now, that the level of wages should be determined by the laws of supply and demand. In his 1981 encyclical *On Human Work* Pope John Paul II continued an emphasis on labour issues, particularly on the dignity of work and the rights of workers. Through work we both meet our daily needs and find fulfillment as human beings.

Some employers have an almost unlimited supply of workers needing employment at almost any wage and some of these employers think that optimizing profits is the main objective of their business. This mind set can be in conflict with the CST principle that wages must meet the needs of a worker.

Although the state imposes a statutory minimum wage, it usually falls far short of a just wage such as the “living wage” that takes into account the cost of living in a particular location. The living wage is the single most important means of eradicating poverty. The living wage is usually defined as the hourly wage required to pay the rent and other reasonable bills for a family of four with two full time wage earners.

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Pope John Paul II says in the encyclical “*On Human Dignity*” (section 6) that the value of work is not based on the type of work done but on the fact that it is a person doing the work and that person has inherent dignity. Catholic Social Teaching documents have dealt with questions of labour and the rights of workers as necessary for the protection of human dignity: the right to suitable employment, to just wages and to collective bargaining.

The Second Vatican Council commented on the just wage (*The Church in the Modern World*, 67): “Finally, payment for labor must be such as to furnish a man with the means to cultivate his own material, social, cultural, and spiritual life worthily, and that of his dependents.

What this payment should be will vary according to each man’s assignment and productivity, the conditions of his place of employment, and the common good.”

Pope Leo XIII stated in the encyclical “*On the Condition of Labor*”, section 34: “If through necessity or fear of a worse evil, the workman accepts harder conditions because an employer or contractor will give him no better, he is the victim of force and injustice.”

Pope Leo XIII further stated in section 17 that it is not always easy to determine if a wage is adequate, but he warned employers about abuse of workers “Rich men and masters should remember this – that to exercise pressure for the sake of gain, upon the indigent and destitute, and to make one’s profit out of the need of another, is condemned by all laws, human and divine. To defraud any one of wages that are his due is a crime which cries to the avenging anger of heaven.” See also James 5:4.

We might recast the parable of workers in the vineyard as the parable of the living wage. In the original parable of the vineyard the workers of the early morning were promised one denarius, which was the living wage of the time. So, at the end of the day the owner paid a denarius to each of his workers, regardless of their amount of work. We can think of him as being a just employer who saw the need that all his workers have for a living wage.

*Gordon Stuart, Social Justice National Committee
BC & Yukon Regional Council*

ENCOURAGE SCHOOL PERSEVERANCE AND BREAK THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

OPÉRATION BONNE MINE is a Society of Saint Vincent de Paul program that helps youths all over Quebec. The program responds to young people's needs in terms of personal, social and cultural accomplishments in order to encourage school perseverance.

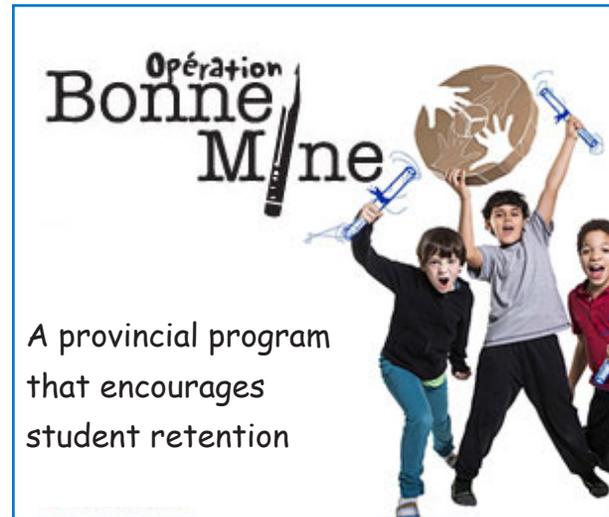
Developed by the SSVP to help families by reducing financial pressure at the beginning of the school year, and at the same time to provide young people with a positive experience at school, thus developing their self-confidence and encouraging them to continue their studies.

The assistance is offered in three forms:

- Financial assistance at the beginning of the school year;
- Financial assistance during the school year, for activities that foster sociocultural development (e.g. educational outings, art-therapy workshops, etc.);
- Scholarship program to recognize efforts and perseverance.

BENEFITS OF THE PROGRAM

OPÉRATION BONNE MINE are flexible, in that it gives parents tangible means that help at the beginning of the school year and allows participation in extracurricular or cultural activities, as well as day or summer camps. Perseverance scholarships may also be granted, helping young people in purchasing sports equipment or cultural materials and may also be used for the subsequent year's school programs. Applications of the program may vary from one region to the next.



ASSISTANCE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SCHOOL YEAR

Financial help is offered to families in need. That help is supplied in the form of vouchers that are exchangeable in all participating schools for school related fees and in all participating Pharmacies Jean-Coutu for school supplies and materials, as well as in all other participating stores.

OPÉRATION BONNE MINE tries to meet the major challenge of fighting statistics that show that children

who live in a low income environment are more likely to abandon school prematurely. It is a fact that school dropouts from underprivileged backgrounds are twice as many as dropouts from privileged backgrounds.

*Lise Blais, Project Manager
Quebec Regional Council*

THE POVERTY CIRCLE

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One of the great attributes of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is our ability to make personal contact with our friends and neighbours in need. It is this personal contact that also enables us to seek and find Jesus Christ where He told us to look...amongst the poor. We usually make this contact during home visits which we make to those in need. This contact can also occur when we meet these friends at our parish, during a meal at a soup kitchen or perhaps during a visit to one of our thrift stores.

The concept of the circle is one that likely started in our indigenous communities and is now used in a number of formats that include addiction and abuse counselling, as well as restorative justice. The dynamic involved in the circle can be one that is non-judgemental and very rewarding to all involved. The circle allows people to share with others and discover that many of their difficulties are common problems. There is also the opportunity for the group to discuss solutions to particular issues.

I can recall a poverty circle which I was part of several years ago. We invited several local residents who were experiencing poverty with whom the local SSVP Conference was familiar. We had a similar number of SSVP members present. One

SSVP member led the discussion, but had no formal or written agenda. We sat in a circle and began by asking each of the guests living in poverty to tell the group about their situations. All were free to ask questions or discuss the issues brought forward. There were tears shared by several of those present and some positive solutions as well as a commitment from our local SSVP to provide further help beyond food and clothing.

**THE CIRCLE
ALLOWS
PEOPLE TO
SHARE WITH
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DISCOVER
THAT MANY
OF THEIR
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ARE COMMON
PROBLEMS.**

Since holding that poverty circle I have been reminded of our Rule when it talks about social justice and advocacy. The important point from the Rule states we should try to empower those in need to be able to speak up on issues that affect them and where needed to be their voice. I believe we tend to discount the ability of those we serve to speak for themselves and assume that we know exactly what they need.

I would recommend your Council or Conference consider holding such a poverty circle in an effort to give a voice to the most vulnerable. We may all be pleasantly surprised at the ability they have to voice their concerns, challenges, and hopes in terms that are much more relative to their needs.

Submitted by,

*Jim Paddon, National Chairperson
Social Justice Committee*

CONCERNS OF THE SOCIETY OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL IN QUEBEC WITH REGARD TO BILL 70

A major social issue in Quebec right now is the development of social housing, or affordable housing, for people in need and low income families. Following the recent welfare reform – which ultimately results in a reduction of income of up to \$250 per family, the Quebec SSVP reacted by filing a brief to the Parliamentary Committee on Bill 70. Among other things, that controversial bill proposed that people on welfare would have to work or participate in training or community projects, if they wanted to avoid seeing their monthly cheque substantially reduced.

However, the bill was eventually adopted, even though in 2016, the SSVP filed a brief to defend the less fortunate, who would be directly affected and impoverished by that bill. You will find hereafter a summary of contents of the brief filed by Michel Olivier, then VP of the Quebec Regional Council, in parliamentary commission.

CONCERNS OF THE SOCIETY OF SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL IN QUEBEC WITH REGARD TO BILL 70

In the past years, we have experienced severe job losses, to the extent that even people who are trained appropriately find it increasingly difficult to obtain employment in various Quebec regions.

For a while now, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul has been affected by the loss of jobs. Bill 70 is of major concern to us, because many of the bill's guidelines are not clearly defined. Here are our main concerns:

CONCLUSION

Bill 70 is too constraining. Any beneficiary could be subject to a major cut in monthly welfare payments, and such an approach might lead to extreme destitution among the most underprivileged people in our community. The bill is too rigid and needs to be improved. The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Quebec believes that such an approach is not desirable and above all, unimaginable in 2016, for our Vincentian members across Quebec.

Pierre Morissette, Social Justice National Committee, Quebec Regional Council

WILL THE BILL APPLY TO NEW WELFARE REQUESTS?

Does the bill target only young people or will it affect new beneficiaries who lost their job, or experienced a family breakdown, or health problems, etc.?

THE BILL EXPECTS TO REPLACE THE 'ALTERNATIVE JEUNESSE' PROGRAM WITH THE 'OBJECTIF EMPLOI' PROGRAM.

The 'Alternative jeunesse' program helped many Society of Saint Vincent de Paul beneficiaries to overcome their difficulties. Why not maintain that program during the transition period to the new 'Objectif emploi' program, while its effectiveness is validated?

IT SEEMS THAT THE BILL PROPOSES TO REDUCE WELFARE PAYMENTS FROM \$613 TO \$300, FOR THOSE WHO WILL NOT COMMIT TO THE 'OBJECTIF EMPLOI' PROGRAM.

With the ever increasing cost of living (housing, public services, food, debts, etc.), an amount of \$613 is already insufficient. How can we imagine reducing it?

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul already provides them with minimum food assistance that helps them survive.

If welfare payments are reduced, it will become impossible for a beneficiary to find housing. Have you provided for an alternative (housing for the homeless) or are you planning to extend to all regions the homeless people situation in Montreal?

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

When we began using the term social justice for our various actions under this topic we felt it was important to include any work that used to be called prison ministry. We now tend to call this restorative justice as it better describes what our efforts are about. Restorative justice can apply to prison visits but is predominately aimed at working with former inmates as they try to return to society.

There is no doubt crime and poverty have a very strong connection. While we can't condone criminal behaviour we can try to better understand why many people are left with little choice but to commit crimes to feed their families or especially to feed an addiction. Spousal and child abuse in the home often leaves scars that can only lead to actions that would not otherwise have been considered.

The concept of restoring justice to their lives is one that can apply while they are still imprisoned or living in the community. We are simply trying to restore some justice and human dignity to the person, regardless of their criminal record. The idea of actually visiting prisoners is not something that many of our members would have an interest in while helping someone return to being someone who can return to a life as normal as possible is certainly something most of us are familiar with through our ongoing works of charity.

Restorative justice needs to add an enhanced effort that is directly related to these returning citizens. This is where social justice and actions are required. We currently have a program started in Hamilton, Ontario which we call Friends of Dismas. On the personal level we match up two Vincentians with a returning citizen and they meet on a regular basis

in an effort to establish a long term relationship based on trust and love. We call these 'compassionate justice teams'. In addition, we have a program through our Hamilton thrift stores where we provide any inmate with a package of essential supplies which they receive upon release. Our store will also help with further assistance of clothing and furniture as required.

These are simple acts of kindness which any Vincentian can undertake if you are located near a prison. I encourage you to consider something similar. We can provide further information and resource material upon request and we hope to have this information on the national website later this year.

While our efforts are more concentrated on life upon release from prison let us not forget that the jail cell is a very lonely and demeaning place to be. There is still a real need to visit prisoners. We do have several such groups, within the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, visiting inmates. I sincerely thank these members for their dedication and love for the least of our sisters and brothers. There are also some important issues related to our current criminal justice system which need to be addressed. One is certainly the disproportionate number of indigenous people affected by the criminal justice system. This is a very complicated issue but one that must be addressed by all levels of government as well as organizations such as ours.

THE CONCEPT OF RESTORING JUSTICE TO THEIR LIVES IS ONE THAT CAN APPLY WHILE THEY ARE STILL IMPRISONED OR LIVING IN THE COMMUNITY.

Submitted by,

*Jim Paddon, Chairperson
Social Justice National Committee*

RURAL POVERTY

Rural poverty does not hit the headlines in the way that city poverty does. Rural poverty tends not to be an in-your-face poverty in the way that city poverty with its panhandlers, street folks and soup kitchens is. Sadly it is still there, in Ontario's green countryside and picturesque rural towns, hiding from the casual observer and certainly invisible to most of our politicians.

Rural poverty is generally not as extreme or as concentrated as in the cities but it is still a constant and depressing feature of too many lives. In our small town of Strathroy (population about 17,000), ourselves plus three other churches, the SSVP Economy Store and the Salvation Army, provide a food bank, free meals, food vouchers, emergency aid, interest free loans, free sanitary products plus much else, on a regular basis to over 200 people. Unfortunately that number continues to grow as people retire without pensions capable of supporting a reasonable standard of life.

**WE RECORD
THEIR ANSWERS
TO THE SIMPLE
QUESTION "WHAT
THINGS WOULD
MOST IMPROVE
YOUR LIFE?"**

For poor people too many aspects of life are loaded against them. Rents and utility bills, particularly electricity, take up an increasingly major percentage of their income, leaving reduced amounts for food and clothes. If they can't afford a car, there is no public transport for shopping or medical appointments and the list goes on.

In an attempt to try and offer something more than the standard regular band-aide assistance, we have made contact with local politicians and have had particular success with our local MPP, Monte McNaughton. Mr. McNaughton is taking the issue of rural poverty seriously and has convened two conferences of stakeholders in Strathroy and Wallaceburg. It is too early to expect results from these, but people with the ability to make a difference are starting to take note of rural poverty and the misery it can bring to people's lives.

Additionally in an attempt to improve on the limited data we have on the problems affecting poor people's lives we have started to question all the people attending our outreach clinics and free meals. We record their answers to the simple question "What things would most improve your life?" This is a project we have only just started but once we have sufficient data to hone in on the major issues, we plan to call meetings with local politicians, local businesses, the media and other interested parties and try to find some solutions that will improve lives.

The main take-a-way from this is that the SSVP should act as a pressure group both at local level, provincial level and at the federal level. It is not good enough to be a silent service. As individuals we can be silent but as a group we need to shout loudly on behalf of the poor we serve. Additionally we need data, when talking to decision makers, we need to have specific information regarding the problems facing the poor. Talking in generalities, no matter how heartfelt, will not induce policy makers to take action.

Reg Harford, All Saints Conference, Strathroy ON

PRAYER AND SYSTEMIC CHANGE

The 1960 film *Tunes of Glory*, directed by Ronald Neame and starring Alec Guinness, tells the story of a very volatile, but well liked commanding officer of an army unit, who is being replaced by a very rule-conscious younger man. The ensuing turmoil does not end well for either individual.

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My reason for referring to this film is that systemic change often starts with a situation that, though crying for change, has become somewhat livable. As a result, there is a built-in inertia toward change.

This leads to the spiritual point that good systemic change, in the spirit of St Vincent de Paul, requires prayer for the triple necessary charisms: wisdom, patience, and courage. Remember, these charisms were built-in to the sacrament of Confirmation you received many years ago. Ask the Lord to re-activate the graces of that sacrament; He will be pleased to do so.

Also keep in mind that systemic change is the logical next step after emergency help. Also do not forget that love of neighbour without justice for the neighbour, is a half-baked reality.

Msgr. Peter Schonenbach
National Spiritual Advisor

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AN OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE OUR SAY

“Without a solution to the problems of the poor, we will not solve the problems of the world. We need projects, mechanisms, and processes to implement better distribution of resources, from the creation of new jobs to the integral promotion of those who are excluded.” This is one of Pope Francis’ statements on what the world needs to do about poverty. It comes from a book about his views on poverty and capitalism entitled “This economy that kills”. It is a very profound statement that gives us clear direction as Christians and as citizens.

Now we have an opportunity to respond to our Christian and civic callings, thanks to a new initiative from the Federal Government. The Ministry of Families, Children, and Social Development of the Federal Government has launched a consultation on how Canada can develop a strategy to reduce poverty. They want to hear from Canadians who have experience in dealing with poverty. To help us get started, there is a discussion paper, “Towards a poverty reduction strategy” which lays out the issues that are familiar to Vincentians and poses questions that can help us to clarify our thoughts and to make suggestions.

The discussion paper talks about the many dimensions of poverty which include the personal and the societal. When more than 10 per cent of the people live in poverty, there is a great deal of human suffering and there is loss to the community when people cannot participate in the economy or in other community activities.

The discussion paper recognizes that poverty has become more severe in the past while because fewer people have been able to escape poverty. Between 2006 and 2011, only 60% of low income people moved up the income ladder, while in the 1980’s and 1990’s, 70-74% of low income earners could achieve better incomes and so exit poverty.

WHEN MORE THAN 10 PER CENT OF THE PEOPLE LIVE IN POVERTY, THERE IS A GREAT DEAL OF HUMAN SUFFERING AND THERE IS LOSS TO THE COMMUNITY WHEN PEOPLE CANNOT PARTICIPATE IN THE ECONOMY OR IN OTHER COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES.

Vincentians have known for a long time that poverty has become more severe for many of our neighbours in need because the increases in minimum wages and social assistance benefits have never kept pace with the rate of inflation. Some people exist on less than 50% of the poverty line and their every day survival requires all the energy they have. Reducing the severity of poverty for these people is an important first step in helping them to gain a meaningful role in society.

Another important fact about poverty is that the longer a person has lived in poverty, the longer it will take for them to regain a meaningful place in society. Vincentians who work in very impoverished neighbourhoods understand this very well because they see erosion of mental and physical health due to long term deprivation.

They also observe a serious lack of literacy and social skills due to lack of opportunity to practise them in their circumstances. A worthwhile poverty reduction strategy must address the needs of people living in long term deep poverty for two reasons: to restore dignity to the people and to give the children of these families a chance at good education and future employment. Too often anti-poverty initiatives help people who can exit poverty easily, but we need to advocate for our neighbours who are in the greatest need.

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Our neighbours-in-need often belong to groups that have for a long time been identified as being at greatest risk of living in poverty. They include: indigenous people, people with disabilities, visible minorities, recent immigrants, single parents, especially mother-led families and increasingly seniors. What we can say for sure is that there need to be many programs to solve the problems of all these groups of people. All levels of government and many community agencies will need to play their parts. Vincentians are called to participate because people who live in the deepest poverty need our voice to advocate for them so that

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they will not be left behind. We must be prepared to work towards poverty reduction over the long term because quick remedies do not usually address the deeper issues.

The discussion paper provides good information on the many dimensions of poverty and direction on how to get involved in helping to reduce poverty.

You can find it at:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/poverty-reduction/discussion-paper.html>

*Corry Wink, Social Justice National Committee
Ontario Regional Council*

ONRC ADVOCACY COMMITTEE PRODUCES NEW PAMPHLET ON HOUSING

The Voice of the Poor/Advocacy committee in Ontario has developed a new pamphlet about the unaffordability of housing for many of our neighbours in need. Ten thousand copies were printed and distributed at the ONRC spring meeting. ONRC encourages the idea of a five minute social justice discussion at each Conference meeting. This discussion would usually be led by a social justice representative whose job it is to identify a topic that is relevant to the work of the SSVP and about which we could advocate.



Housing is a big issue for almost all people who live on low incomes. Most spend more than 30% of their income on shelter; many spend more than 50%. Often, the quality is so substandard that it is hazardous to the health of the people living there. Nevertheless, landlords seem to be able to raise rents arbitrarily and with no warning.

In a short anecdote, the pamphlet describes some of the most important issues that go along with unaffordable housing. Our neighbours in

need worry about when the next rent increase will come and they wonder how they will be able to cope. Moving often causes social instability for the family as each person must forge relationships in the new neighbourhood. Sometimes, the children have to change schools which is a major upheaval for them because they must adjust to new teachers, new ways of teaching, not to mention different rules on the playground. Housing is a major source of stress for many families.

The pamphlet goes on to give statistical and historical information about how we got to the housing situation that we have today and makes suggestions about how we might go forward to remedy the situation.

This pamphlet is one of a series of discussion materials that the committee has developed to help Conferences develop the habit of a social justice discussion at their meetings. These discussions can help to clarify our understanding and prepare us to advocate effectively.

You can check out the pamphlet and other materials on the ONRC website under Advocacy/Voice of the Poor. Then look under "resources".

*Corry Wink, Social Justice National Committee
Ontario Regional Council*

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MISSION

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul is a lay Catholic organisation whose mission is:

To live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice and joy.

VALUES

The Mission of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul implies that as Vincentians we:

- see Christ in anyone who suffers
- come together as a family
- have personal contact with the poor
- help in all possible ways.

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Canada Revenue Agency
Charity Registration No. 132410671RR0001

Official publication of the Society
of Saint Vincent de Paul - Canada
ISSN 2560-824X

Made with the collaboration of :
Ghislaine DuNord, Ellen Schryburt, John Grocholski
et Denise Miron
Editor : Nicole Schryburt
Graphic Design : Caroline Gilbert



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