



VINCENTIAN VISITATION GUIDELINES

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St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

GUIDELINES FOR VINCENTIAN VISITATION

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet is about Vincentian visitation. It flows from discussions we have about where we assist people; that is, visiting people in their homes or meeting with them in a Care and Support Centre or Vinnies Support Centre.

In all the discussions, there has been agreement that the way we assist people unites us as Vincentians wherever we carry out that service. This resource explores the qualities of a Vincentian visit as well as associated practices.

PURPOSE

The aim of the Vincentian Visitation Guidelines is to encourage good practice in how we respond to the needs of the people we assist and our fellow members. The guidelines supplement the regular discussions that occur in Conference meetings about visits and about other charitable works that members undertake. The guidelines enable new members to understand the Vincentian approach of the Society to assisting people in need.

All Central Councils and Regional Councils are encouraged to read and discuss these guidelines as they regularly reflect on how members within their Councils are being supported in their work of visitation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge and thank the Victorian State Council for allowing us to use their guidelines document as a template for writing the New South Wales version. The guidelines were written by experienced Vincentians from metropolitan and regional Conferences with assistance from staff.

WHERE ARE WE VISITING?

Whether an encounter between members and the people we assist takes place in a person's home, in a Care and Support Centre, a Vinnies Support Centre or somewhere else, it is referred to as a 'visitation'. As Vincentians, we reach out with the hand of friendship, offering Christ's compassionate love through our presence. We always endeavour to avoid any suggestion that we assess people or evaluate their honesty to see if they are worthy of our help.

PART 1: RESPECTING THE DIGNITY OF THOSE WE SERVE

OUR MISSION

The St Vincent de Paul Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

OUR VISION

The St Vincent de Paul Society aspires to be recognised as a caring Catholic charity offering a 'hand up' to people in need. We do this by respecting their dignity, sharing our hope and encouraging them to take control of their own destiny.

OUR FOUNDERS AND INSPIRATION

The St Vincent de Paul Society owes much to its founders and inspirational leaders, both past and present. The Society was founded in Paris in 1833 by Blessed Frederic Ozanam, a devout Catholic and brilliant young student, who was passionate about social justice and reform. He and his companions were guided by Blessed Rosalie Rendu, who was a member of a religious congregation called the Daughters of Charity.



Frederic took his inspiration from St Vincent de Paul, the patron saint of charities, and St Louise de Marillac who was Vincent's spiritual partner and collaborator. In 1633, Vincent and Louise co-founded the Daughters of Charity.

In 1854, Father Gerald Ward established the Society in Australia at St Francis' Church in Melbourne. A young adult Conference and an adult Conference still operate there today. In 1881, Charles Gordon O'Neill began the first Conference in NSW at St Patrick's church, Church Hill, in Sydney.

The Society offers new members an induction program which includes a learning and development module called Society Orientation, which explores the contribution of our founders, our ethos, and our inspirations.

SPIRIT AND CHARISM

The vocation of the Society's members, who are called Vincentians, is to follow Christ through service to those in need and so bear witness to His compassionate and liberating love. Members show their commitment through person-to-person contact. Vincentians serve in hope.
(The Rule: Part I, 1.2)

Intimately tied with the quality of the visit is the ongoing formation of members in what it means to be a Vincentian. Formation in the Vincentian lay tradition provides the basis on which we reach out to others. Members, and those who support members, need to be continually refreshed in the purpose of the Society.



Sculpture by Alain Courtaigne: *Blessed Rosalie Rendu of the Saint Médard church, Paris*

THE RULE

The Society serves those in need regardless of creed, ethnic or social background, health, gender or political opinions.

(The Rule: Part I, 1.4)

The Rule beautifully describes what is expected of Vincentians in serving those in need. We provide not only material aid to the marginalised, the lonely and the disadvantaged; we also offer much more through our compassionate service, respect, love, kindness and friendship as we recognise in them the face and spirit of Christ. The Rule offers members a way of living and serving within the Vincentian framework by responding to the Gospel message of Christ.

VISITATION IN A CARE AND SUPPORT CENTRE OR VINNIES SUPPORT CENTRE

GRATITUDE TO THOSE WE VISIT

Vincentians never forget the many blessings they receive from those they visit. They recognise that the fruit of their labour springs not from themselves, but from God and from the poor they serve.

(The Rule: Part I, 1.12)

When we meet with those who come to us for assistance in a Care and Support Centre or interview room, it is preferable that the room looks, in part, like a dining or lounge room. Members would ideally sit around a table with the people we assist rather than behind a desk.

We seek to communicate that we are there, in an equal relationship, to work with them in addressing their concerns and needs. How and where we sit non-verbally communicates this relationship. On behalf of the Society, we hold for people vouchers, assistance funds and other resources, but we do not hold power over them. It is important to judge the situation, not the people, and act in a manner where they feel respected and acknowledged as a person of value. (See excerpts from the article, 'Reflection on Service' in Appendix A.)

As in a home visit, there are two members present in a Care and Support Centre visit. There are many reasons why we visit in pairs; safety is only one factor. Visiting in pairs carries much wisdom and brings the benefit of having the knowledge, good judgement/discernment, sensitivity and compassion of two Vincentians rather than of one. It also ensures there is someone with whom to discuss the meeting afterwards, and to consider further ways to support the person/people.



WHAT HAPPENED TO THE TERMS CLIENT, CASE AND INTERVIEW?

These guidelines offer a variety of terms to describe the **people** we assist:

- a. People seeking assistance.
- b. People we seek to serve.
- c. People we serve.

We suggest the **interview** be considered a **visit** or **meeting**.

There is no intention to mandate changes in terminology. These guidelines seek to encourage Conferences to review their practice and approach. Our values are often reflected in the language we use. By offering alternative terms, we hope to encourage members to discuss the values that underlie our practice. The name we give to the encounter or the person we assist is secondary to the way we treat the person. Forms and policies are not easily changed and, therefore, some of these documents may continue to refer to the people we assist as clients.

FACILITATING HOME VISITATION

CONFERENCE WORK

The main work of the Conference is to visit people in their homes, in hospitals, in institutions or wherever else they may be found needing aid or comfort. Those who are homeless have a special call on the charity of members.

(The Rule: Part III, 2)

Conferences use a variety of models to assist others. Some meet people in a Care and Support Centre or Vinnies Support Centre, others go to people's homes or visit them in hospitals or care facilities. Some Conferences engage in all these forms of visitation.

- Members who visit people in their homes describe the value of seeing them in their surroundings, often gathering helpful information about many aspects of their circumstances. The result is a richer and more holistic encounter for all involved.
- Members also visit with people in a Care and Support Centre or Vinnies Support Centre. If sufficient time is set aside for it, this visit can also be rich. It seems to be where we can meet most people experiencing homelessness. Some consideration may be given to including home visits in addition to this kind of Conference work. More time spent in a more intimate setting can enable members to gain an understanding of other underlying or unaddressed needs where Conferences can assist.

Strategies by which a Conference might increase member interest in home visitation:

- Invite one or more members from a Conference that does home visitation to your Regional Council or Conference meeting and ask them to share their experiences.
- Partner with a nearby Conference that does home visitation or refer some visits to them. If possible, a few of your members might be part of a home visitation team from that Conference.
- In your Regional Council, discuss how to develop this practice in your region. An employee working as the Regional Director, Member and Community Engagement Coordinator or someone on the Member and Youth Experience Team at the State Support Office may be able to assist you.
- Undertake targeted recruitment of people to engage them specifically in home visitation. Ensure that suitable training is available and that they are adequately prepared for their role.

All Conferences and Councils are encouraged to consistently plan strategies for engaging new people with the Society to share in our service. Conferences can find recruitment resources on the Member and Volunteer website (MAVS).



THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE SOCIETY

The spirituality of the Society reminds us that love is our first gift; to suspend judgement; to approach our work with a generosity of spirit; and to share our faith through our attitudes and actions.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION PRACTICES

Formation practices that develop the spirituality of the Society are to:

- Pray as an individual and as a Conference.
- Read about the charism of the Society and discuss it in meetings.
- Take to heart the Gospel message.
- Think about visits and debrief at meetings.
- Recognise that ongoing reflection on our service is part of spiritual practice.
- Pray before a visit which reminds us that the visit is a prayer.

PRACTICE GOOD COMMUNICATION

EMPATHY

Vincentians endeavour to establish relationships based on trust and friendship. Conscious of their own frailty and weakness, their hearts beat with the heartbeat of the poor.

(The Rule: Part I, 1.9)

Conference methods of operation will vary according to local practices and needs, but some general points to consider are:

- **Ensure that members who visit those seeking assistance have access to all relevant information held by the Conference.** Knowing what assistance has previously been provided and any special needs within the family is helpful and enables the visit to be more personal.
- **A Vinnies Support Centre** may refer a request for assistance to a Conference whose members can then respond to the need within their capacity.
- **If visiting in the home or another location, you may find it helpful to phone beforehand.** If you are using a private mobile phone, **phone number blocking is recommended.** Check with your phone carrier on how to do this.
- **Explain who you are.** The person members are assisting may be more cooperative if they realise that help is being offered by the Society and not by government workers. There may be circumstances where a visit may be based on a referral from a Parish or another community group. It is suggested that members wear a St Vincent de Paul Society name badge that displays their first name, and offer a simple introduction such as, “We are local volunteers from the St Vincent de Paul Society, a Catholic voluntary organisation.”
- **Allow enough time for each visit.** Conferences that are very busy acknowledge that this is a challenge. It is addressed in *Part B - Looking after Ourselves and Each Other*.
- **Accept that it takes time to find out the reasons behind someone’s plight** and the several issues that need to be considered.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

- **Appreciate that what someone has asked for may not be what they really want or need.** For example, they may ask for food, but they may really be very lonely, or the request may be only part of what they really need.
- **It may take several visits or even longer** before members establish a trusting relationship.
- **Be a thoughtful and genuinely interested listener** and be fully present with the person during the time you are with him or her.
- **Engage openly and positively.** For example, “What’s been happening for you and your family since we last spoke?” Let them lead the conversation and be at ease. Highlight and affirm the family’s successes and strengths.
- **Paraphrase.** This indicates that you have understood what they are saying. For example, “So your husband has been ill for two weeks and you need food for a week?”
- **Follow-up visits or phone calls** are valuable even if further assistance is not requested.
- **Leave a card** if you call and the people are out.

More detail about visits is covered in Society Orientation training.



UNDERSTAND AND RESPECT CULTURAL AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCES

The Society strives, with charity, to foster new attitudes of respect and empathy for the weak, so that all are able to understand, recognise and defend the right of each person to be responsible for his or her own life. The Society promotes understanding, cooperation and mutual love among people of different cultures, religions, ethnic origins and social groups, and so contributes to the peace and unity of all peoples.

(The Rule: Part I, 7.7)

Be conscious of and seek to understand the various ethnic, cultural, and religious differences that you may encounter.

Being aware of things which may offend, or please, various backgrounds and cultures will enhance the visit. For example, it may be important to take off one's shoes at the door or it may be inappropriate for a man to visit when no male from the household is present.

Know, and liaise with, local support agencies. The value of networking with other agencies cannot be overestimated.

Be aware of changing social structures in the local area. For example, increasing rental and housing costs in surrounding suburbs, the impact of drought or the closure of a factory or a large local employer.

Keep up to date with the needs of people in a changing world. For example:

- Cloth nappies are virtually unobtainable. Disposable nappies, which are more convenient, should be viewed as a basic budget essential.
- Because mobile phones have become essential for communication, they should not be viewed as a luxury item. A pre-paid card often enables many of those we serve to budget better and eliminates the cost of a monthly landline rental fee.
- The internet has become an essential communication and education tool. Therefore, it should be viewed as a valid living expense, particularly if there are children in the family.

Sharing our faith. Some Vincentians take prayer cards on visits and have offered to pray with those they assist. However, Pope Benedict states in his encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, that charity cannot be used to proselytise.

The most effective means that we use to demonstrate God's love and compassion are likely to be our presence, action, and attitudes. But, where a person has, without any prompting from the members, asked for prayer, it may be appropriate to assure him or her of our prayerful support.

RESPECT THE CHOICES OF THOSE WE VISIT

Vincentians serve the poor cheerfully, listening to them and respecting their wishes, helping them to feel and recover their own dignity, for we are all created in God's image. In the poor, they see the suffering of Christ.

(The Rule: Part I, 1.8)

All visits should be conducted with the spirit of the Rule at the forefront of our minds.

Help but do not judge. Vincentians are in a privileged position where they get to glimpse what life is like for those they serve. Judging both belittles people and devalues the work of the Society. It is important that members maintain a clear distinction between *making a judgement* based on a person's needs and situation and *being judgmental* because of a personal bias or one's preconceptions.

Walk a mile in their shoes. For most of the people being assisted, life is difficult. Begrudging them the few joys they have in life (cigarettes, having a pet) is not in keeping with the Vincentian spirit.

Understand the power of addictions and how difficult it is to overcome them.

In discussing how best to help in these situations, Conferences may consider the best option is to make a referral to another more suitable agency. Members are encouraged to seek out local forums and attend workshops where they can learn more about addictions and the services that are available in their local community.

Be aware of pre-conceptions and leave them at the door. Vincentians who themselves have struggled financially, or who have been very successful in their lives, may have difficulty in empathising with someone else who is coping as best they can in difficult circumstances. Remember that others may not have the knowledge, education, life skills, and social supports that enabled our choices.

Know that all is not what it seems. It is important to consider that people can feel humiliated and devastated by members who are being judgemental. For example, criticising a person for having a nice home, car, or a big TV without knowing the reasons that explain the situation. It may be that there has been a loss of income, breakdown of a marriage, the effects of mental illness or an inability to manage a mortgage because of other circumstances.

Focus on the person and not on their environment. Do not worry about the tidiness of the home. When visiting someone who has tattoos or body piercings, resist making value judgements about their personal appearance.

Be respectful when communicating that a Conference will reduce a person's assistance. If a Conference decides that a person is to receive reduced assistance, or in some circumstances can no longer assist, communicate the decision in person, and in a respectful and compassionate manner.

DURING A VINCENTIAN VISIT WE SHOULD:

- Be warm and friendly and allow sufficient time for the visit.
- Accept people as we find them.
- Remember we are friends, not investigating officers.
- Listen with empathy without interruption.
- Be open minded and open hearted.
- Smile – it costs nothing but is worth millions.
- Keep to basics but try to get to the core problems.
- Uphold the dignity of those we serve.
- Be positive and encouraging.
- Seek new ways to assist people.
- Be aware and sensitive to cultural needs.



PROVIDE A 'HAND UP' WHERE POSSIBLE

PROMOTE SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Vincentians endeavour to help the poor help themselves whenever possible, and to be aware that they can forge and change their own destinies and those of their local community.

(The Rule: Part I, 1.10)

In providing a 'hand up', the Conference helps to change someone's situation, sometimes for the long term. It may not always be obvious that the circumstances of the person being assisted are improving; we hope, however, that all our visits have a positive impact on their lives.

A 'hand up' can include providing advocacy to facilitate access to much needed medical assistance, developing life skills, helping people to stay in education or encouraging someone to find employment. At Conference meetings, it is important to discuss and agree upon various methods of assistance.

Where it is not possible to effect long-term changes, the immediate assistance provided in the form of food or other support and the relationship we develop with people will be important to their overall well-being.

Take time to understand the underlying issues a person is facing.

Develop a referral network to respond to issues that lie beyond the expertise/resources of the Conference and maintain a file with information on external and internal providers that is regularly updated. The Regional Director, Member and Community Engagement Coordinator and your Central Council can also provide resources and advice.

Advocacy and networking involve building relationships with local groups, community forums, Members of Parliament, and local government bodies. Often, such relationships provide an opportunity to offer a 'hand up' to people we assist and increase the effectiveness of the Society's social justice advocacy.

Wherever possible, **contact other organisations with the person rather than for them** so that the person being assisted can build up the knowledge and confidence to advocate for themselves in the future. Always be aware of the need to protect the privacy of the person being assisted and understand your obligations under the Society's Privacy Policy.

Consider methods of assistance which allow people to develop their skills. For example, one Conference took the time to go shopping with individuals. Another Conference delivered cooking classes, while a third Conference provided adult education classes.

Be aware of the benefits to individuals and families of participating in recreational activities and providing respite care. For example, pay sports club fees to allow children to participate in sport and arts activities; provide families with leisure opportunities during school holidays; refer children to youth staff or members so they can attend Buddies Days or other activities; refer families to the Wollongong Central Council Office to book a holiday on the South Coast at one of the Society's flats at Gerroa and Mollymook.

Be willing to hang in with people for the long haul. What may not work with someone the first or the fifth time may work on the sixth occasion.

Consider when a situation is too complex for a Conference to deal with. With the person's permission, seek help either from a higher Council within your Central Council or refer them to a more appropriate source of assistance such as Vinnies Services or a local community organisation.

REIMAGINING HOME VISITATION

Many live their lives in an ocean of endless complex problems or, alternately, in isolation and loneliness. Yet, our responses often seem routine and preconceived, only aimed at dealing with the symptoms and not the cause. These are some questions we can ask about how we carry out our visits and engage with the poor:

- Do we respond to their needs or to our preconceived views about their needs?
- Do we make people feel better about themselves and more hopeful?
- Do we empower people to take greater control of their lives?
- Do we build capacity, skills, and confidence in people?
- Do we build resilience in people to withstand hard times?
- Do we reduce the level of exclusion and isolation?

Robert Fitzgerald, *The Record* (Winter, 2012), pp 11-13.

PRESERVING PRIVACY

Because people are entitled to access their records at any time, Conferences must ensure that any records they make about the people they assist only consist of factual statements and not a member's opinion or interpretation.

The basic principles of record-keeping to consider are:

- Each member should know what personal and health information they need to obtain from people they are assisting and why.
- Each Conference should have an agreed understanding of where personal and health information will be stored and how it will be dealt with.
- To be more effective, there may be occasions when a Conference needs to consult an external agency or a professional. Doing this without getting the person's permission does not breach privacy **provided** the information the Conference discusses does not reveal the identity of the person being assisted.
- Unless a person has given their permission for the Conference to share information to a person or agency outside the Society, members should only share information about the people they assist within the Conference. There are legal exceptions to this principle. Members should always speak with their Conference President first before disclosing personal or health information to an external person or agency. The Conference President may consult the Regional Council or Central Council for advice.
- Members and volunteers are entitled to be assisted and every effort must be made to preserve their privacy as well. In this case, personal and health information about a member or volunteer who is being assisted should not be discussed in Conference briefings.
- All records must be stored in a secure place



CONFERENCE PRACTICES

Wherever possible, Conferences should consider how they match Vincentians with the people they are assisting when allocating visits. For example:

- A woman who has experienced domestic violence may feel more comfortable with at least one woman in the assistance team.
- When responding to the needs of a person who is displaying challenging behaviours, a man may need to be part of the assistance team.

In consultation with the Conference President, the person allocating the visits should consider possible personality clashes between specific members and those being assisted, and situations where a member may over-identify with a person in need. In this case, it may be necessary to swap with another member.

Wherever possible, the same assistance team should be consistently matched to the same people needing assistance. Continuity allows the assistance team to build a relationship with the person or family.

Discussing visits has many benefits for Conferences including:

- Validating decisions members have taken.
- Helping members review their practice and learn from each other.
- Providing opportunities for members to debrief.
- Creating opportunities to address difficult situations and consider alternatives like advocacy and collective action.



FOOD

There are benefits to providing food vouchers, gift cards and food parcels. Some Conferences use a mix of both, with vouchers used for fresh food.

Where the assistance a Conference provides includes a food parcel, the following points need to be observed:

- The food should be nutritious.
- For health or cultural reasons, the Conference should consider individual dietary requirements. These can be recorded and displayed on the inside of the Conference pantry or on an individual's card.
- People should be able, without penalty, to choose from what has been made available to them. This provides them with dignity of choice and avoids a risk the food parcel will not meet a person's dietary needs and unnecessary waste.
- Conferences should never offer products after their use-by date, in rusted, dented, swollen or broken containers or which do not have a label.
- Pantry items should be regularly checked and rotated, and items which have passed their use-by date should be discarded.
- If providing a parcel, extra items which are relevant to a person's circumstances (such as baby food or dog food) should be included.

PART 2:

LOOKING AFTER OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER

Vincentians endeavour to establish relationships based on trust and friendship. Conscious of their own frailty and weakness, their hearts beat with the heartbeat of the poor. They do not judge those they serve, rather they seek to understand them as they would a brother or sister.

(The Rule: Part I, 1.9)

If they hope to help others effectively, Vincentians must look after themselves and one another. The structure of the Society supports its members. It is the collective responsibility of Councils and Conferences to create a nurturing environment for members and volunteers. A key role of Councils is to provide members and volunteers with the information, tools and resources that help them provide effective assistance to people experiencing disadvantage.

Individual members demonstrate their personal responsibility to the Society and to those whom they serve by becoming knowledgeable about the practices of their Conference and those of other organisations in the local area.

SUPPORTIVE PRACTICES

THE SPIRIT OF POVERTY AND ENCOURAGEMENT

Members of the Society are united in the same spirit of poverty and of sharing. They encourage one another to live a profound spiritual life and to share in the spirit of prayer. For this purpose, the role of a Spiritual Advisor is very important.

(The Rule: Part I, 3.13)

- Promoting Vincentian spirituality so that it enhances, refreshes, and becomes a living part of a member's personal spiritual journey.
- Providing opportunities for members to develop their spirituality and prayer life by attending renewal and prayer events, retreats, and regional gatherings where members can enrich and support each other.
- Fostering a culture where the needs and well-being of a member's family is their first priority. As the Rule states: *The Vincentian vocation affects all aspects of members' daily lives, making them more sensitive and caring in their family, work, and leisure activities. Vincentians are available for work in the Conferences only after fulfilling their family and professional duties (The Rule: Part I, 2.6).*
- Supporting flexible ways in which younger members can maintain a connection with their Conference, while they manage competing responsibilities associated with work, study and raising a young family. For instance, Conferences can conduct some meetings outside office hours, allow members to attend some meetings via video call and be sensitive to the competing Society and personal demands all members must manage.

- Encouraging members, either collectively or individually, to share their personal feelings and discuss their circumstances within the Conference.
- Offering support to members who are experiencing personal difficulties.
- Inviting the Conference Spiritual Advisor to offer his or her insight and support in situations that may be difficult or challenging.
- Members are encouraged to share what they can reasonably do or feel comfortable doing. They should not feel they have let the Conference down if they have personal limitations. If members decide not to take on activities which are more appropriately handled by a professional their decision will be supported.
- Conferences should develop a list of referral agencies that can assist with emotional, practical, or financial issues. Referral enables the people we serve to access professional advice and support and is an important part of our Vincentian work.
- Allow sufficient time in meetings for members to debrief and discuss their visits. It is important to affirm and support members in their decisions, recognising that the assistance they give is based on their assessment of the situation. Discussing decisions, joys, concerns, and doubts creates a supportive and growth-filled environment for all.
- Members can become emotionally drained because of a particular situation and may need to step back – both for their own good and that of the person being assisted. If members feel disheartened or overwhelmed, they should feel sufficiently comfortable to ask for help from their fellow Conference Members.
- Situations affect individual members differently. Debriefing during a Conference meeting may not always be sufficient to ease a member's mind. In such cases, members can speak to the Conference President, a Mission, Spirituality and Pastoral Care Partner or call the EAP for a confidential discussion.
- Conferences should be alert to the potential for personality clashes between their members and the people they assist and should adjust their manner of assisting people as required.
- At times, a member may become over-involved in a situation and risk losing their perspective. In this situation, the Conference President may wish to discuss alternative arrangements with a member.



- Implement and monitor safe visiting practices always. Here is an example of a prayer that assisting teams might say together before a visit:

Prayer before visitation

Lord where two or three are gathered in your name you are in our midst.

Walk with us now as we journey with the people we assist today.

Be our support as we are your hands, feet and heart.

We ask this prayer in the name of Jesus.

PRAYER BEFORE VISITS

Vincetians pray that the Holy Spirit may guide them during their visits and make them channels for the peace and joy of Christ.

(The Rule: Part I, 1.7)

CREATE GUIDELINES

Conferences generally create local guidelines which define the types, amount, and frequency of the assistance they provide, as well as their referral networks and processes. These are developed after prayerful consensus by members and, if desired, with input by the Regional Council President.

Assistance guidelines empower members, give them greater confidence, and give greater meaning to their charitable work. By understanding what assistance members can provide, how much they can offer and how it is provided, they can be more effective in their work.

SHARE THE WORKLOAD

Workloads should be designed to allow for the maximum benefit to people we assist while also protecting the well-being of members. Ensuring that no team has more visits in a session than they can reasonably manage allows members to be fully present and to offer effective assistance.

A healthy growing Conference **shares the workload** and gives all members opportunities to participate and live the Vincentian life. Regional Councils have a particular role in helping Conferences adopt good practices.

Visitation must always be done by a team of two and it is recommended that teams are rotated regularly.

Conferences experiencing heavy workloads might consider:

- Recruiting new members or associate members.
- Enquiring if there are any youth or young adult members seeking opportunities for service.
- Seeking assistance from other Conferences that may have more members or fewer visits.

INVOLVING NEW PEOPLE IN OUR SERVICE

Associate members or volunteers may be recruited to help share the load. All applicants are required to complete a Member Application Form, Working with Children Check, and National Criminal History Check, and provide the contact details of two referees. The Society will pay for the National Criminal History Check.

Conferences may choose to recruit for specific roles. These can include Call Coordinator, Treasurer, Statistics Officer, or a Secretary. This can free up other members to conduct visitation. For example, a Conference Call Coordinator can organise calls and visits while a Statistics Officer can assist the Conference to record data on visits and assistance provided and generate reports.

The Conference President should ensure that all Conference Members, Associate Members and Volunteer Members have completed an application form and that they forward it to their Central Council Office.



PROVIDE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR WORK HEALTH SAFETY

Implementing and monitoring Society-approved Work Health and Safety practices ensures that Conferences can continue to assist people in need.

All assistance must be given by a pair of members. This is required by both the Rule and NSW State Council policy. Visiting people alone compromises the Conference Member, the person being visited, and the Society.

If instinct suggests that a situation may be unsafe, neither enter the premises nor undertake visitation. Alternatives can include meeting at a Care and Support Centre or a Vinnies Support Centre, or in a public place. If a person behaves in a threatening manner, members should immediately terminate the visit and exit the premises.

At least one of the assisting pair should be experienced and members should adopt a trauma-informed approach. For example, a woman who has experienced domestic violence may not be comfortable with a male member being involved in the visitation.

Conferences should ensure that assisting teams are well briefed on past incidents such as previous calls or work health and safety concerns.

Members should report all work health and safety hazards and incidents to the Conference President and complete and lodge a WHS Hazard Report Form or WHS Incident Report Form which can be downloaded from MAVS. All members should review and be aware of relevant WHS safety guidelines for visitation.

Members have the right to always be safe and it is acceptable for a Conference to refuse to assist if their safety is compromised.

NURTURE AND SUPPORT MEMBERS

MEETINGS OF THE VINCENTIAN MEMBERS

The members meet as brothers and sisters with Christ in the midst of them, in Conferences that are genuine communities of faith and love, of prayer and action. Spiritual bonds and friendship between members are essential, as is the common mission to help the poor and marginalized. The entire Society is a true and unique worldwide community of Vincentian friends.

(The Rule: Part I, 3.3)

Affirm and support each other in Conference meetings, remembering that assistance teams are free to make the decision they believe is the right one at the time. This autonomy to make decisions at a local level is called the principle of subsidiarity and applies to the Society as a whole.

To affirm each other, it is helpful to:

- Remember that some members and volunteers are not Catholic and that there is a need to respect differences.
- Mentor new members in the Vincentian approach. Find ways for longer-term members to share their experience and knowledge to guide and encourage newer members.
- Take advantage of Society formation, and learning and development opportunities, and look for local training opportunities in your local community.
- Attend annual Masses and member gatherings and include the commissioning of new Conference presidents and members in these events.
- Conferences may wish to honour long-serving members and acknowledge years of service anniversaries.
- Celebrate or acknowledge member birthdays, anniversaries, and special events. Highlight the feast days of our founders.
- If possible and agreeable, have member retreat days, evenings, mornings, or afternoons to nurture a relationship with God and one another.
- Attend together local retreat, prayer, and events, such as Taizé prayer evenings, e-conferences, Zoom workshops and reflection days.
- Appoint a member of the Conference to keep in touch with sick and inactive members and organise a roster to visit. They may also encourage social activities among the members, possibly including partners and families.
- Attend annual Society events as a Conference such as the Rosalie Rendu Lecture and other special events that arise.

ENRICHMENT OPPORTUNITIES

It is incumbent on members to continually develop and update their skills. Informal training occurs through discussions at Conference meetings and by partnering new members with more experienced members.

State Council is committed to providing the most appropriate support to allow members to give the best possible response to the people we assist. It is the responsibility of Central Council, Regional Council and Conference Presidents to ensure that both new and more experienced members undertake formal learning and development activities.

Members can access a broad range of learning and development opportunities and new opportunities can be developed if there is sufficient demand. Your Member and Community Engagement Coordinator can provide advice if you are unsure how to access these opportunities. Recruitment resources to assist Conferences to attract new members are also available. Further information can be found on MAVS.

CLAIMING EXPENSES

Members donate generously of their time and there is no need for anyone to be out-of-pocket for travel or other expenses.

The Volunteer Reimbursement Policy for member and volunteer reimbursement states that the Society will reimburse preapproved out-of-pocket expenses incurred directly because of undertaking designated volunteer work. This means that Councils and Conferences need to discuss and agree upon their practice regarding member and volunteer reimbursement.

Once the practice is confirmed it should be communicated to members. The Volunteer Reimbursement Form and mileage rates can be found in the Volunteer Reimbursement Policy which members can download from MAVS.

Whilst transparency in reimbursement is important, so is member privacy. For example, when giving a report a Treasurer should avoid naming individuals who have made a claim to be reimbursed for.

STAYING IN TOUCH

Society publications and correspondence distributed through MAVS, by email and by post assists members to stay in touch with what is happening in the wider Society. Conference Presidents should ensure that members have access to and have opportunities to read this material.

The Record informs members about what is happening in the wider Vincentian family at the national and international level. Some Conferences discuss articles from *The Record* during meetings.

Twice per year, *Vision* magazine is published and distributed to NSW Conferences, Centres, and Special Works. This shares a wide variety of stories and news from across the State.

The website of the St Vincent de Paul Society offers a range of information and resources. *The Record*, *Vision*, *Spiritual Reflection Guides* and other publications are available under 'Publications' on this website.

MAVS contains resources and information that supports Conference life and charitable works.

All Regional Council, Central Council, and Vinnies Services offices have access to the Staff Portal. For those who do not have access to the Staff Portal, Central or Regional Offices may be able to assist in finding news, information, and resources.

See Part 4 of these guidelines for more resources.



PART 3: HOW CAN WE BEST ASSIST?

RESPONSIBLE ASSISTANCE

No work of charity is foreign to the Society. It includes any form of help that alleviates suffering or deprivation and promotes human dignity and personal integrity in all their dimensions.

(The Rule: Part I, 1.3)

The Rule and Frederic Ozanam's writings make it clear that he and his companions, and those who followed, were committed to giving much more than material goods to those in need. His words invite us to enter a dialogue and relationship with those we serve, and to give of our time, our gifts, and our presence. It is often more beneficial to take the time to help people being assisted to become less dependent on charity and take control of their lives. This is the true meaning of offering a 'hand-up' rather than a 'hand-out'.

This may require members to discuss if the needs of the person being assisted are beyond our resources. Prayer and the discernment of members are invaluable at this point.

Members are responsible for Society funds and resources. Blessed Frederic Ozanam urged us to err on the side of generosity. Through prayer, experiences, discussion, and awareness of the available resources, visiting teams use their discretion when deciding the amount and form of assistance in each case.

Members need to continually update their knowledge and skills so that we improve our ability to provide appropriate and effective assistance and support.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ASSISTANCE

- It may be more efficient and effective to give a greater amount of support to help a person or family through a crisis than to provide minimal support which may make little difference to the person's/family's immediate situation. For example, they may need a larger amount but may then need little or no ongoing support.
- Conferences are advised to discuss situations where the support provided by the Conference has become an integral part of a person's budget. There are instances where it is appropriate to assist a person on a regular basis over a long period. For example, a person may be suffering mental illness or a medical condition which makes it difficult for them to plan and manage without ongoing assistance.
- Other situations call for a Conference to set limits on what they can offer and to communicate that clearly and compassionately. It is preferable to reduce material support incrementally rather than end it abruptly. The Conference may choose to continue to visit or provide support in other ways.

- Look for opportunities for how a person may engage in different kinds of support. This may involve referring someone to programs or services that can empower them. Examples could include the Clemente Program, literacy and numeracy courses, crafts, a Men's Shed, community lunches, Buddies Days, or volunteering with Vinnies.

EXAMPLES OF ASSISTANCE

This list is not exhaustive. Other assistance may also be considered by the Conference.

- **Food vouchers or food parcels.**
- **Housing, rental assistance or emergency accommodation.**
- **Clothing, furniture, and household items** are generally accessed through Vinnies Retail Shops by completing designated vouchers and following local procedures.
- **Pharmacy, medical, dental, and optical medical assistance** can be vital for some people. Conferences sometimes set up an account with a local provider. Members need to be aware of concessional dental and optical services for those we serve.
- **Three types of phone assistance are available:**
 - a. **Telstra vouchers** are provided through the Telstra Bill Assistance Program. All Conferences are issued with vouchers annually and are strongly urged to use them.
 - b. **Telstra Phonecards** are a pre-paid calling card that can be used to make local, national long distance, international or mobile calls from Telstra payphones.

Follow Regional or Central Council protocols to get access to these resources.

- **Utility bills.** Encourage contact with utility providers to access hardship and concession schemes prior to using Society funds.
- **Education support** may consist of education allowances for school-age children. It is widely recognised that helping children complete their education assists in breaking the cycle of poverty. Adults can be provided an allowance for further education or given access to return-to-work programs.
- **Travel expenses and petrol costs** can be subsidised to assist with attending medical appointments or emergencies.

This is not a complete list. Conferences are encouraged to be creative in how they provide a 'hand up'. Some Conferences provide recreational and leisure assistance such as time at a Society owned holiday home, cinema tickets or sports equipment.

Where another agency in the area is adequately addressing any of the above needs, it is appropriate for the Conference to work with that agency and refer people to them.

NON-MATERIAL ASSISTANCE

No Interest Loan Scheme (NILS)

Vinnies NILS offers financial assistance by providing safe, fair, and affordable credit of up to \$1,500 (\$2,000 for those experiencing domestic violence) for the purchase of essential goods and services without imposing any interest payments or loan fees on borrowers throughout the term of the loan. NILS loans are available to individuals earning up to \$45K or to couples or single parents earning up to \$60K per annum. Loans are typically repaid over 12 months.

Vinnies NILS aligns with Section 1.10 of the Rule which states *“Vincentians endeavor to help the poor to help themselves whenever possible, and to be aware that they can forge and change their own destinies and those of their local community”*. There are currently 14 Conferences that provide NILS assistance in their locality and they are supported by the NILS Client Support Officers. It is expected that more Conferences will join the program as members learn more about how NILS can benefit the people they assist.

Vinnies NILS is also available state-wide and can be accessed by phone on 1800 484 664 or email at nils@vinnies.org.au. More details are available on the Society’s website at Vinnies NILS. Conferences that wish to participate in the NILS program may contact member.programs@vinnies.org.au

Budget Counselling

Trained budget counsellors listen to a person’s concerns and hopes and work with them to set a budget that enables them to work towards attainable goals.

Financial Counselling

The Society has a few accredited financial counsellors who assist those who are either at risk of financial distress or are facing acute financial difficulties.

Advocacy

This might include talking with energy providers or contacting credit card companies on behalf of someone we are assisting. It may mean advocating for better access to services such as lobbying for more bulk billing by GPs and specialists.

Helping with Access

This includes assisting to complete forms, contacting agencies or the relevant NSW or Commonwealth Ombudsman.

PART 4: RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

RESOURCES

- Member Application Form
- The Rule
- Spiritual Reflection Guides
- Welcome Pack
- Member Recruitment Guide
- *The Record* (published quarterly by the National Council)
- *Vision* magazine (published twice per year by the Society in NSW)
- Member and Volunteer website MAVS (<https://mavs.vinnies.org.au/home/>)
- Society website (www.vinnies.org.au)
- The Society has free use of the Department of Home Affairs translating and interpreting service (TIS National). To access the free interpreting service call TIS National on 131 450.

WEBSITES

www.vinnies.org.au

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia. Search this website for information about forms of assistance provided by the Society and publications that can be distributed at Society gatherings, meetings, youth events, schools, and social justice activities.

<https://mavs.vinnies.org.au/home/>

The St Vincent de Paul Society NSW Member and Volunteer website (MAVS). This is a specialist member and volunteer website that provides practical and policy resources to support members in Conference life and members and volunteers in their charitable works.

<https://www.youtube.com/user/VinniesAU>

There are many film clips about the Society on YouTube. *Mate Helping Mate* and *Understanding Mental Illness* are Conference resources available on YouTube.

www.famvin.org.au

Vincentian news and events for the worldwide Vincentian family.

<http://vinformation.famvin.org>

Vincentian resources, games, and media.

<http://mission.depaul.edu>

De Paul University, Chicago provides videos, books and podcasts on Vincentian mission and values.

<http://www.nilsnswfindascheme.org.au/>

Provides a comprehensive list of NILS schemes and providers in NSW.

MEMBERSHIP, VOLUNTEERS AND REGIONAL OPERATIONS STAFF

State Support Office

Ph: 02 9568 0262 Email: membership@vinnies.org.au

Metropolitan Region

Sydney Central Council Office

Ph: 02 9350 9600 Email: MetroMembers@vinnies.org.au

Broken Bay Central Council Office

Ph: 02 9413 2274 Email: MetroMembers@vinnies.org.au

Greater Western Sydney Central Council Office

Ph: 02 8861 9700 or 02 8861 9770 Email: MetroMembers@vinnies.org.au

North East Region

Lismore Central Council Office

Ph: 02 6621 5835 Email: lismore.reception@vinnies.org.au

Maitland/Newcastle Central Council Office

Ph: 02 4967 6277 Email: maitland.newcastle@vinnies.org.au

North West Region

Armidale Central Council Office

Ph: 02 5776 0200 Email: armidale@vinnies.org.au

Bathurst Central Council Office

Ph: 02 6362 2565 Email: bathdio@vinnies.org.au

West Region

Wilcannia-Forbes Central Council Office

Ph: 02 6862 5758 Email: Wcfsvdp@vinnies.org.au

South Region

Wollongong Central Council Office

Ph: 02 9820 8223 Email: Kathy.Jones@vinnies.org.au

Wagga Wagga Central Council Office

Ph: 02 6923 1905 Email: Svdpwagga@vinnies.org.au

TRAINING

The Society offers a range of online training opportunities to members through the Vinnies Learning Centre (VLC).

The Society can also offer essential training courses by virtual and face-to-face training modes of delivery. Workshops are offered to members on some topics. The following is a list of compliance training modules members have an opportunity to complete when they join the Society.

- *Society Orientation* training is provided to new members, introducing the foundations and purpose of the Society, and training in basic visitation skills.
- *Child Safe Familiarisation* training is provided to new members and explains their obligations and responsibilities under NSW child protection legislation and the Society's Safeguarding Children Policy. The Safeguarding Children Policy requires that members complete refresher training at least every two years.
- *Code of Conduct* training is provided to new members, providing guidance to members, and enabling them to act in accordance with the Vision, Mission, Aspiration and Values of the Society.
- *Work, Health and Safety* training is provided to new members and explains their obligations and responsibilities for workplace safety.
- *Privacy, Confidentiality and Social Media* training enables new members to understand how to collect, store and manage the personal and health information of people the Society assists and what information members can post on social media.

APPENDIX A

EXCERPTS FROM A REFLECTION ON SERVICE

In the article 'In the Service of Life', Rachel Naomi Remen provides an interesting perspective on the difference between helping and service to those she has been asked to assist. Rachel writes: "In recent years the question 'How can I help?' has become meaningful to many people. But, perhaps, there is a deeper question we might consider. Perhaps the real question is not 'How can I help?' but 'How can I serve?'"

The wholeness in you is the same as the wholeness in me. Service is a relationship between equals. Helping incurs debt. When you help someone, they owe you one. But serving, like healing, is mutual. There is no debt. I am served as the person I am serving. When I help, I have a feeling of satisfaction. When I serve, I have a feeling of gratitude. These are very different things."

Everyone who has ever served through the history of time serves the same thing. We are servers of the wholeness and mystery of life. Our service serves us as well as others. Over time, fixing and helping are draining, depleting. Over time we burn out. Service is renewing.

When we serve, our work itself will sustain us. Service rests on the basic premise that the nature of life is sacred, that life is a holy mystery which has an unknown purpose. When we serve, we know that we belong to life and to that purpose.

For us as Vincentians, we serve out of compassion and a willingness to act out our faith. As Rachel puts it, "The impulse to serve emerges naturally and inevitably from this way of seeing: for us, it provides the inner strength that comes from learning to 'serve as Jesus served'."

Penny Craig

National President Society of St Vincent de Paul, Canada

<https://www.ssvp.ca/sites/default/files/vp-summer-e.pdf>



ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY

PO Box 5

Petersham NSW 2049

Phone: (02) 9568 0262

Email: vinnies@vinnies.org.au

www.vinnies.org.au



St Vincent de Paul Society

good works