

Good afternoon.

My name is Michael Barilla I'm speaking on behalf of Board of Directors of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Our concern is the taxes paid by low income families. The elimination of the low income tax credit and the possibility of reinstating the state grocery tax are and will have a huge impact on the lives of the working poor in Georgia. And many of those families are the people we help in our communities.

First, let me give you some background on our group. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has been working in Georgia since 1903. Today, we have over 4,100 volunteer Vincentians in 69 local groups, from Lagrange to Hartwell and Blue Ridge to Thomson. Last year our services and programs reached 179,000 Georgians. The Society supports 35 food pantries throughout the 55 county area of North and Middle Georgia. Last year, we distributed \$5,130,269 in financial assistance. The Atlanta Business Chronicle just ranked us in the top 50 Georgia Charities.

We have support centers in Chamblee, McDonough, West End and Dallas, Ga. These locations offer adult learning opportunities and provide temporary help such as financial assistance, food pantries, thrift stores, and a car donation program. Through these centers, we have distributed over \$1 million in food, clothing and vehicles in addition to the direct financial aid we offer.

Our support centers are leading indicators of the needs in our communities. In our Chamblee center, for example, two years ago we had about 50 clients each month seeking help with food and other basic needs. Today, we see 125 families each week.

While we are a service based in Catholic communities around the state, we help anyone, regardless of background.

The St. Vincent de Paul group in Blue Ridge is small, with eight active members. However, last year, those eight volunteers helped 242 households in Fannin County with over \$33,000 in direct financial aid..

The unique strength of our approach is that our volunteers visit people in their homes. That's where we do the bulk of our charity work. In metro Atlanta, people often find out about us when they call 211 and United Way gives them our phone number. Or, they may be referred by a utility or a local community charity. Even apartment managers know to refer their residents to us when they are in need.

It is those home visits that make us different among service providers. Each month, we collect money from our congregations, and then spend the rest of the month taking calls and visiting clients in their homes and apartments. Sometimes, if the person has no other place to meet, those visits take place in weekly motel lobbies, homeless shelters, or in our church. During those visits, we listen to the stories that got the folks into their troubles.

We offer an ear to people whose only other adult conversation that day may have been with bill collectors. It's not easy for most of these folks to call us. It's usually their last resort before eviction or bankruptcy.



These citizens aren't a class of society or a statistic. They are real people who really don't want to be in their situation. They are people like you and me. Fifteen percent of the people in Fannin County are below the poverty level.

They are people like the family of five we visited in John's Creek. They had been living on the father's minimum wage salary for five years, until his hours were cut back. They had managed to get by for several months, waiting for things to turn around. The mother was looking for work but was also caring for her three sons, two who were doing well in school, and a preschooler who she cared for during the day. The parents had great hopes for all three of their children. They only needed a couple of hundred dollars for rent, and were dealing with past due utility bills on their own.

This family certainly could use the \$104 tax credit to help offset the taxes they pay on their car each year or the sales tax on things like toilet paper, clothes, and school supplies. And they certainly don't need to have more of their groceries taxed.

Or the single mother of two young daughters who struggles to send a little money every couple of months to her son in college. She had been working as a nurse's assistant for six years but lost her job after being out due to a car accident. The car was drivable, but was seized because, not working, she couldn't make the payments. She had depleted her savings and called us to help pay a \$108 electric bill to the local EMC. She could sure use the tax credit for the money she earned while working. And she sure doesn't need to have her groceries tax raised.

These aren't people who want to be in need. These aren't folks that are trying to scam the system. They are, hard working folks trying to raise families and keep their heads above water.

They are people like you and me.

Who among us wasn't a bit timid to open their 401K statement over the last 4-5 years? If you are like me, you avoided that unpleasant task because the envelope didn't have any good news in it. Luckily, you and I could afford the luxury of not opening that envelope each month and wait to deal with it about when things turned around.

Most of our clients have to treat their bills the same way, only for much different reasons. If most of your income goes to put a roof over your head, there isn't much point in opening your electric or gas bills as soon as they arrive.

Taking away \$104 from a family of four may not seem like to a lot to you and me. We can make that up by cutting back on something. Those living on the edge don't have that much to give up. Since food stamps won't cover soap, diapers, or toilet paper that may be where the cutbacks occur.

Faith based agencies are vital components of a solution to poverty. We don't shrink from our vocation to minister to the poor, whether it's those in temporary or longer term need. However, increasing taxes on the working poor just shifts the burden to charities like ours.

We should be doing more to give these folks a lift out of their troubles to get them on a recovery path. Being one of only 13 states to tax a low income family of four adds insult to the many injuries these people endure. These aren't folks that are asking for the government to save them. They just don't want the state to make things worse. Please-do no harm to these very vulnerable fellow citizens or to the many charities that offer them a hand up.

Thanks for your time and consideration.