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J. Patrick Murphy C.M., Ph.D.

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The COVID-19 Pandemic and Homelessness: Depaul International Responds

J. Patrick Murphy, C.M., Ph.D.

BIO

J. PATRICK MURPHY, C.M., PHD, serves as the Values Director of Depaul International, where he lectures on values and leadership to trustees and staff in several countries. He is emeritus professor of public service at DePaul University where he founded Vincent on Leadership: The Hay Project. He received a PhD in higher education administration from Stanford University and an MBA from DePaul University. He is a Vincentian priest based in Chicago.

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This is a story of Depaul International, a nonprofit organization and a member of the global Vincentian Family.¹ Depaul and its subsidiaries responded to homeless service users during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Perhaps the best way to summarize how Depaul’s staff members spent their year working in the pandemic is to say they lived out the motto of Saint Vincent de Paul, “*Totum opus nostrum in operatione consistit. Action is our entire task.*”²

With countries shutting down quickly, service users had nowhere to go. Information was scarce and unreliable. Staff essentially used the see-judge-act approach. They would see what was going right or wrong, then make a judgment about what to do, and then take action. They identified best practices and shared ideas by working together across cities and countries.

For more than fifteen years prior to the pandemic, Depaul International invested in its people by training them extensively in Vincentian values and leadership principles. As a result, we can observe herein that staff shared common Vincentian values,³ provided leadership, increased communication, and shared resources and best practices across boundaries. We found examples of shared values and can explore whether sharing made a difference to staff personally or in effecting organizational success.

We offer these stories, examples, and practices to aid others who serve the homeless and poorest people today—and in future pandemics—in the manner of Saint Vincent de Paul.⁴

What Would Vincent Say?

My first thought was, “What must be done?”

—United Kingdom

Historical Context

As noted in the organization’s introductory pamphlet, “Depaul International (originally Depaul Trust) came into being in London in 1989 as an initiative of the late Cardinal

1 I am grateful to the many people who contributed to this work from Depaul International and its subsidiaries—country and city directors, staff, and volunteers too many to name. We would not have these stories without their generosity.

2 Bernard Pujo, *Vincent de Paul the Trailblazer*, trans. Gertrud Graubert Champe (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2003), 251.

3 Please see Appendix for the complete list of official mission, vision, and values of Depaul International.

4 It is not our purpose here but may be interesting for some readers to put Depaul International’s efforts and the issue of homelessness in context by referring to literature on that question. See, for instance, Barrett A. Lee, Marybeth Shinn, and Dennis P. Culhane, eds., “The Dynamics of Homelessness: Research and Policy,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 693 (January 2021), at: <https://www.aapss.org/the-annals>.



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The Depaul International logo; and members of Depaul USA.

Courtesy of the author



Basil Hume, who became its founding patron.” Depaul International and all of the charities in the Depaul Group find their roots in the work of Saint Vincent de Paul, born in France in 1581. “This means that we are part of a 400-year tradition of helping those in society who are the most disadvantaged and needy, in the words of Saint Vincent, ‘the poorest of the poor’—homeless people.”⁵

Currently the Depaul Group includes Depaul United Kingdom (founded in 1989), Depaul Ireland (2002), Depaul Slovakia (2006), Depaul Ukraine (2007), Depaul USA (2008), Depaul France (2013), the Ruff Institute of Global Homelessness (2014), Famvin Homeless Alliance (2017), and Depaul Croatia (2018). The chief group executive is Mark McGreevy, OBE.

General Findings

Depaul International focused its efforts on providing targeted support to subsidiaries. The United Kingdom team raised over £250,000 (\$353,000)⁶ for local COVID-19 responses within two months, increased its fundraising activities for subsidiaries, partnered with funders and governments, shared experiences and knowledge from across the Depaul Group, and continued to provide intensive support to its CEOs during the crisis. Because of COVID-19, Depaul International expected a drop of 20 percent in fundraising income,

⁵ Alison Veasey, *So Tell Me about Depaul* (London: Depaul International, 2018), 1. Cf. Kelli McGee, *So Tell Me about Depaul* (London: Depaul International, 2014), 2. See: https://issuu.com/kellimcgee/docs/so_tell_me_about_depaul.

⁶ Depaul reports financial data in British pounds, euros, and US dollars. We provide this data in BP and USD to be clear to readers in the UK and the USA.

equating to £150,000 (\$211,900). In fact, one of the surprising effects of the pandemic was an increase in fundraising income. The number of donors and the amounts of gifts increased during the pandemic in response to greater need, even though staff cancelled or postponed all in-person appeals and events. The pandemic brought out the generosity of people—at least for homeless people.

Despite the severe challenges Depaul faced, the speed with which Depaul subsidiaries responded to COVID-19 was plainly inspiring. Staff worked quickly and through long days to meet the needs of the most vulnerable in what was a most stressful time for them and their families. In France, for instance, the country director had to shut down his Paris center with a one-day notice from the government. His first action was to get the cell phone numbers of each homeless person who used their services to “make sure they didn’t lose anybody.” Until they were able to reopen their center, he called each of his service users every day. In the United Kingdom, the Daughters of Charity provided some much-needed comfort that the staff of the whole Group hugely appreciated.

In the Famvin Homeless Alliance, members of the Vincentian Family expanded their efforts to build thirteen houses for homeless people in their cities and neighborhoods and are now running ahead of schedule because of the increase in donors’ generosity during the pandemic.

Service users became service providers. In some cases, homeless service users began working in service of others because many of the usual volunteers were older and more at risk for the virus and had to quarantine themselves by government order. With fewer volunteers, the service users stepped up.

In some groups, personnel turnover increased. Turnover is high in Depaul service centers because the staff tend to be young and the opportunities for promotion are fewer because the number of paid staff is small. During the pandemic, staff began working twelve-hour days to respond to the increasing needs of service users, so they tended to burn out quickly.

For the most part, when countries shut down, centers closed and staff worked from home. Many staff lived in small apartments with other family members. The four walls of their residences seemed to close in on them.

What Would Vincent Say?

I heard Vincent in my head whenever I was trying to figure out what to do.

—St. Louis, Missouri, USA



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A 13 Houses Campaign project in Madagascar, Famvin Homeless Alliance.

Courtesy of the author

How did staff respond to COVID-19 in 2020?

In the United Kingdom, when others closed their service centers, staff quickly determined to stay open and go large to accommodate the increase of homeless people. For instance, staff opened hotels with government support. They also took on new work, creating floating support staff and providing COVID-19 care out of hospitals.

Most staff worked from home, but some had to keep some housing and support services open. Relatively few people just had to keep going. When they made the decision to open hotels, people across the organization moved to help open the facility—HR, policy people, school staff, and volunteers.

The young people were exemplary. Volunteers became stronger. Staff created a daily Coronavirus Briefing Room (CBR) meeting. They tracked over one hundred emergency protocols based on adhering to government guidance and, ultimately, legislation.

They began to deliver support to clients digitally. They had to change the way they recruited staff and how clients accessed the services. They had to entertain people and offer digital inclusion. They bought their own personal protective equipment. They managed through three national lockdowns.



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Finding comfort in music, Depaul UK.

Courtesy of the author

They consciously engaged in mission or values in new or different ways

Staff responded to bringing in rough sleepers⁷ on a mass scale by taking over hotels in London and Manchester. They opened three times in London and twice in Manchester. They worked with more than 300 rough sleepers. When other service providers closed, Depaul increased capacity. They created a rough sleeper directory so they could mirror policy makers' language and respond appropriately. An unexpected and surprising side effect of the hotels was a nice upturn in revenue—which allowed Depaul UK to expand services.

They were successful because of their belief in themselves and their extraordinary commitment to hard work and long hours. Consequently, the government and the bigger homelessness agencies noticed Depaul.

Did staff develop new or creative strategies?

Staff worked twelve-hour shifts on services, maximizing their time off and minimizing travel for staff. The Coronavirus Briefing Room meeting served to get a tight grip on what was happening in services to eliminate any chance of an outbreak of COVID-19. They had many cases, but only one service center saw two positive cases at any one time, and none beyond that, so to date it seems to have worked well. In the end, one team said, “There was nothing we couldn’t tackle if we tackled it together in that meeting.”

⁷ “Rough sleepers” is a term common to the United Kingdom that compares closely to the phrase “living on the streets” common in the United States.

Did staff invent new best practices?

After the first lockdown in the UK, staff created a process called Back-to-Better to capture what worked well and what they would need to change going forward. Back-to-Better activities included reopening offices in a COVID-19-safe way to allow some staff to come back to work. They did not anticipate subsequent lockdowns. A subsequent program, Back-4-Good, looked at two major things. First, staff needed to figure out how to keep an understanding of mission, values, and culture in a dispersed national organization further dispersed through national lockdowns. Second, they had to determine how to implement new staffing strategies to reflect the new world they faced—such as pay scales, work schedules, the work environment, and changes in technology that became necessary. In general, staff were intimately aware of mission and values because of the training when they joined or first volunteered for Depaul. In addition, many staff had completed the Vincentian Values and Leadership course over time.

Did you share vision, values, or mission with others in Depaul or elsewhere?

Staff frequently reflected on mission and why it was important to answer the call to help more. Even though work was often difficult, a member reflected, “the team kept going and were always buoyant and enthusiastic in their work.” Early on, UK staff shared protocols with Depaul Ireland, particularly around rough sleeping people without recourse to public funds. They also shared resources with The Passage Day Centre and the Cardinal Basil Hume and Noah project in Luton (near London). They were able to help very small organizations with a few basic items and allowed the government to help with funding.

What Would Vincent Say?

Let's keep hope in our hearts and continue to serve our masters.

—United Kingdom

What have we learned?

Caregivers learned how terribly resourceful they could be. They learned how to work hard under extreme pressure. They learned that they were unprepared for a disaster that required managing team staff after sending them home for a year. They learned to change their ways of service delivery to minimize risk. They learned that often senior leadership could do very little. In fact, there were weeks when Depaul was dependent upon their lowest-paid staff who were so brave to go to work on public transportation and to work in crowded hostels and hotels. They kept the organization safe. Everyone was a hero, going beyond job requirements—and even learning to enjoy it.



[Click to enlarge](#)

Images of Depaul Slovakia's response to the pandemic.

Courtesy of the author



Country Stories

Depaul United Kingdom (founded 1989)

When Depaul UK repurposed hotels in London and Manchester to house rough sleepers, the teams established services within a matter of weeks. Many staff from across the organization volunteered to take up shifts to care for residents. Depaul UK expanded the support for more service users providing for their most basic needs, such as food, medicine, and rent. For many young people, there was a real danger they would become even more isolated, with key community services closing down. As such, teams ensured access to technology and Wi-Fi to prevent further social exclusion during isolation.

In the UK, Depaul offers a program called Nightstop. Volunteer hosts open their homes to young homeless people facing a night on the streets or sleeping in an unsafe place. Volunteer drivers and chaperones ensure these young people get to a place of safety. It is a unique project. As a number of Nightstop hosts were in the “at risk” category for COVID-19, Depaul UK paid for emergency accommodation when needed, providing this service for those in the most desperate of situations.

As the COVID-19 crisis exacerbated mental health issues among clients, a well-being team provided training and resources to ensure support would always be accessible virtually.

Depaul Ireland (founded 2002)

Depaul Ireland worked incredibly hard to open a 100-bed cocooning unit, a brand-new initiative in conjunction with the health service executive (HSE) and the Dublin region homeless executive (DRHE). The unit caters to those within the homeless population with

serious underlying health conditions, such as a cancer or HIV diagnosis. They also opened an isolation unit for service users waiting for tests and test results. Both of these projects involved purchasing vital medical equipment, including two examination tables and two vital signs monitors, totaling £10,000 (\$14,100). They also purchased twenty tablets to improve remote working capabilities of key workers and to conduct clinical assessments.

The city director said the first six months of the pandemic were spent managing emergencies daily. Staff worked twelve-hour shifts to address an 80 percent infection rate. They reduced it to 10 percent.

Depaul Slovakia (founded 2006)

Depaul Slovakia remained COVID-19-free for the first nine months of the pandemic operating at or above capacity.

Work in Depaul Slovakia's Nightshelter became more complicated as staff began to take the clients' temperatures, disinfect their hands, and provide them with masks to keep them safe. It was inspiring to see how the team and clients all worked together to ensure a safe environment for everybody. In their commitment to influencing the wider society, the team worked to raise public awareness to protect homeless people and encouraged the community to donate services. In total, Depaul Slovakia projected £24,700 (\$34,900) of coronavirus-related expenditures.

Depaul Ukraine (founded 2007)

Depaul Ukraine adapted its services to ensure homeless people continued to have access to food, medical care, and social support. While some projects had to be suspended because they did not allow for social distancing, the team pulled together to increase its outreach services. In Kharkiv and Odessa, Depaul Ukraine became the only organization providing food to homeless and destitute people. The situation for homeless and disabled patients discharged from hospitals to make way for coronavirus patients was even more challenging. Without Depaul Ukraine's help, these people were at risk of dying in the streets—sick, lonely, and abandoned. Overall, Depaul Ukraine faced expenses up to £63,500 (\$89,700) to provide the highest level of service.

Depaul USA (founded 2008)

Depaul USA booked their most vulnerable service users, such as those with underlying health conditions, into hotel rooms to ensure they were off the streets and received care with dignity. Likewise, as some clients were unable to enter the shelter system, staff purchased one-person tents to ensure that these individuals received care and maintained standard



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Depaul Ukraine facing the pandemic.

Courtesy of the author

social distancing. Depaul USA projected about £70,500 (\$99,600) of COVID-19-related expenditures.

The St. Louis city director said, “Donors are my new heroes, they wanted to do something, and we received tenfold what we were used to. In March, we got so much toilet paper we still have some of it.”

The Little Rock city director quoted a Daughter of Charity who trained her: “If a situation comes up ask yourself ‘does this serve those whom we serve?’ If no, leave it alone. If yes, go after it tooth and nail.” This guided her through the pandemic. In the early days, their center was in full, constant crisis mode. She got family members to take people who were homeless back home. She got a grant to provide tents for all her service users. She established testing every two weeks and she bought all the bus tokens she could get.

The strategic plan of the Arkansas Department of Health assigns the City of Little Rock with the task of housing twenty people in permanent housing each year. Most housing authorities closed during the year. Depaul was able to house more than forty people in permanent housing during 2020.

Later in the year, the city director was able to bring in the symphony to help calm the chaos and boost morale.

What Would Vincent Say?

Our response to COVID-19 is not a call to arms.

It is a call to the heart.

—United Kingdom



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Depaul France providing mobile outreach in the midst of the pandemic.

Courtesy of the author

Depaul France (founded 2013)

Amazingly, staff did not lose track of a single service user throughout the year.

Depaul France worked with some of the most entrenched rough sleepers in Paris—a group especially susceptible to COVID-19. Given the urgent need to take homeless people off the streets, Depaul France booked their most vulnerable clients into hotels. Additionally, the team provided mobile phones to service users who were unable to travel across the city to the day center. They remained in contact with each other and staff helped them to the best of their ability. Along with the recruitment of an additional staff member to help cope with the demand and the implementation of extra health and safety precautions, Depaul France projected additional expenses up to £43,700 (\$61,700).

In February 2020, the government of France announced that anything open to the public must close. This included the day shelter in Paris. This was devastating to the service users. The staff let them know of the edict and dealt with their fear and their great ignorance of the virus. Staff characterized the time as *the great chaos*.

At the beginning of the first lockdown, staff immediately determined not to abandon service users. Most of the service users had cell phones, so staff made sure to get their phone numbers. The director of the center called each service user every day to check on health and welfare.

Meanwhile, most of the forty-two volunteers in the shelter were sixty-five to seventy-five years old. The government announced that people sixty-five and older were to stay home to be safe. In one day, the number of volunteers dropped to from forty-two to four—



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A kitchen run by Depaul Croatia.

Courtesy of the author

10 percent of Depaul’s force. The director launched a search for new, younger volunteers to replace those lost. He stayed in touch with those he lost through email updates.

The staff devised new food distribution schemes—for instance, breakfast moved outside for a socially distanced “Breakfast in the Courtyard.” Service users became service providers by moving furniture outside and then back inside, sanitizing everything.

When they were able to open with social distancing, service users were able to go inside one at a time for a shower, then gather in the courtyard to eat and visit with friends.

Service users are often people with addictions; in normal times, they typically use street begging to support their habits and to buy food, when the shelters are closed. But begging was not possible because people were not leaving home.

Neighbors helped a little because of the respect they had for the work the staff do. Depaul France was able to share information with other Depaul services in other countries and with other services in Paris. All benefitted from this generosity.

Depaul Croatia (founded 2018)

Depaul Croatia continued its day center services during the pandemic while expanding outreach services to ensure homeless people had access to food, healthcare, and hygiene services. The local community showed great compassion donating goods to continue services without interruption. Depaul Croatia sought support to help cover staff salaries of about £20,400 (\$28,800) because of funding delays caused by COVID-19.

The director’s first challenge in the chaos was “to distinguish what was urgent and important from the rest of the concerns.” Often enough it was nearly impossible to sort

out importance and urgency in decision-making. Most regular activities had to be re-engineered. Meanwhile, the team had to adapt and become stronger even as their workload increased, continuing the usual routines for clients' health, hygiene, and meals. The team said they learned how to be Vincentian by increasing outreach and professionalism. They replaced volunteers who failed to show up. They strengthened the organization. They became a stronger voice for the homeless, emphasizing their Depaul Croatian Vincentian values.

What Would Vincent Say?

We asked staff to reflect on the question, "What would Vincent say about your work during COVID-19?" They responded in their own words or their interpretation of Vincent's purported response. Here are some of those responses.

- Continue to preserve your life.—Croatia
- Empty yourself to receive. Make space for all the gifts you will receive.—France
- From Saint Louise, "The streets are my chapel."—Little Rock, Arkansas, USA
- Keep the homeless at the center of your thinking and concern and make decisions with a focus on services to our clients.—Slovakia
- Well done, what next? More ... —Dublin

From staff in the United Kingdom:

- Fear not; calm will follow the storm, and perhaps soon.
- Honored to be included in such a fine group.
- Would he say that he was pleased that we joyfully welcomed the opportunity that came our way to be of service, and that we did our duty well?
- He would say (he did say) that given the unprecedented events facing us that we need to be "innovative unto infinity" in our assistance and duty. I think we have—perhaps not to infinity— but quite a distance....
- Hi, I have just emailed Vincent but his "out of office" is on. Louise informs me his is visiting staff and patients at the NHS Nightingale Hospital in Birmingham.
- The responses to the pandemic across Depaul UK have absolutely embodied our values base—the absolute organization of charity from CBR meetings to excellent partnership work in hotels.
- I think almost a year in, Vincent would say that "charity is a heavy burden to carry" and it is ok to feel overwhelmed and tired, but he would remind us about what it means to be a "servant of the poor" despite the challenges and risks, we must keep smiling and be good humored.



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A community center run by Depaul USA.

Courtesy of the author

- My favorite Vinnie quote is something I think we all do pretty well:
 - Charity is a heavy burden, but keep your gentleness and smile, you are a servant to the poor and should always be smiling and good humored (slightly abridged version).
- He would say:
 - “In a world that changed, maybe forever, Depaul pulled together.”
 - Good luck!
- You have done your duty well; let us continue our work being very humble, very patient and very charitable.
- “That’ll do Depaul, that’ll do.”
- He definitely would *not* say:
 - “Going forward we need blue sky thinking to action thinking outside the box to drill down and touch base offline by close of play...”
 - He might say, “be strong, this too will pass.”
- He would say just get on and do whatever must be done for whoever needs it. Proud that Depaul at every level avoided the easy temptation to be scared about risk—at every level staff jumped straight into whatever must be done to help and support whoever needs it, even if it’s not normally how we do things or what we offer. Innovate and be nimble as always!

Conclusion

In the book Acts of the Apostles, Luke wrote “*Per Transit Benefaciendo. He went about doing good*”⁸ to describe how Jesus lived his life. When Vincent’s community built the chapel that now serves as the motherhouse for the Congregation of the Mission (and pilgrims) in Paris, the members used the quote from Luke to apply to Saint Vincent. More than 400 years later, men and women working with homeless people redoubled their effort to do good. The pandemic took away even the sleeping spots in streets—for some, those were the only “homes” they had. Depaul staff found apartments and hotels and ways to feed them—being inventive unto infinity—as Vincent said. Their first decision in the chaos was to stay open, and then to be sure no one was forgotten, and then expand services. Vincent did the same during the pandemics of his time.

The story of the Vincentian Family and service to the poor continues.

Appendix

Depaul Mission

Our mission is to end homelessness and change the lives of those affected by it.

Depaul Vision

Our vision is of a society in which everyone, across the world, has a place to call home and a stake in their community.

Depaul Values

Our key values underpin all of the work we do.

The Depaul Group celebrates the potential of people:

- We believe in the potential of people.
- We believe in developing the individual and the organization—promoting the development of our service users to achieve their potential, and investing in our staff and volunteers to help them develop and make the best use of their skills to deliver high-quality services.
- We will greet all of the people who use our services with respect.
- We have a strong culture of volunteering.

⁸ Acts 10:38.

The Depaul Group puts its words into action:

- What matters is what we do.
- We are committed to innovation and to finding new ways to tackle the problems that we encounter.
- We believe in justice for all—through influencing structural change in society and supporting individuals.
- We are custodians of valuable resources and recognize our responsibility to use them as effectively as possible.
- We strive to be a best-practice organization.
- We have a global perspective and potential.

The Depaul Group believes in rights and responsibilities.

We believe that people have fundamental rights as human beings and within the law, which must be safeguarded and upheld.

Rights:

- To be treated fairly and with impartiality.
- To have one's ideas and opinions listened to and respected.
- To work in a positive and supportive environment.
- To have one's contribution recognized.
- To be kept informed.

We believe that with rights go responsibilities and a duty to consider others:

- To treat others fairly and with impartiality.
- To listen to and respect the ideas and opinions of others.
- To work with others in a positive and supporting way.
- To recognize the contributions of others.
- To facilitate and take responsibility for effective communication.

Depaul's Philosophy of Care Statement (Welcome Statement)

This statement shows how we put our values into action in our work with homeless and disadvantaged people:

Welcome

We are glad you are here

In this place you can take steps towards a better future

You will lead the way

We will ask, listen and help

We will work and walk with you

Welcome

Each year Depaul International self-funds and runs in-house training courses for longer-serving staff across the Depaul Group on Vincentian values and leadership. It explores the potential for re-energizing not only themselves but the team they work with, seeking new inspiration and new ways to be innovative in their projects so that our clients and residents receive the best possible quality of service. Since Depaul began this program in 2005–06, several hundred staff and trustees have taken part.

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