



2015 Legislative Agenda

The Virginia Catholic Conference – the public policy agency of the Commonwealth’s Catholic bishops and their two dioceses – will pursue the initiatives described below during the 2015 Virginia General Assembly session, which convenes for 46 days beginning on January 14, 2015. The Conference’s agenda was formulated in consultation with its Education and Respect Life, Health, and Social Concerns policy committees, and was approved on November 17, 2014, by its Management Committee, headed by Arlington Bishop Paul S. Loverde and Richmond Bishop Francis X. DiLorenzo. [NOTE: Other items may be added to the Conference’s agenda as legislation is filed and reviewed.]

Respect Life:

- Preserving pro-life gains made in prior years.
- Banning state funding of all abortions not required by federal law.¹
- Prohibiting state investment in research that requires the destruction of human embryos or fetuses and in entities that conduct such research.
- Opposing establishment of a system of presumed consent for organ donation.
- Closing Virginia’s “gun-show loophole” by requiring unlicensed gun sellers at gun shows to conduct background checks on potential purchasers.²

¹ Under the Medicaid Program, the federal government funds abortions when the life of the eligible woman is at risk and in cases of rape and incest. States are permitted, but not required, to spend their own funds (with no federal match) for abortions that fall outside these three categories. Conference advocacy seeks to prohibit government funding of abortion to the greatest extent possible.

² Background checks would determine if the potential buyer has a criminal record or a mental health history making him or her ineligible to own a firearm. The requirement that background checks be conducted currently applies to licensed gun dealers.

Capital Cases/ Criminal & Juvenile Justice:

- Opposing “electric chair default” legislation mandating that electrocution be used to administer the death penalty if the Department of Corrections certifies that lethal injection drugs are unavailable.
- Removing electrocution as a method of execution in Virginia.
- Ensuring that individuals with intellectual disabilities are ineligible for the death penalty.
- Requiring biological evidence for capital punishment.
- Requiring the state to conduct a study of execution procedures.
- Requiring that Virginia law enforcement agencies adopt the *Model Policy on Eyewitness Identification* in an effort to decrease wrongful convictions.³
- Eliminating the lifetime ban on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits for people with drug-related felony convictions who are reentering their communities after incarceration.
- Restoring voting rights to individuals convicted of non-violent felonies who have completed their sentences.
- Opposing disproportionate cuts to community-based juvenile justice programs.
- Increasing the minimum threshold for the crime of “grand larceny” from \$200 to \$500.⁴
- Making juveniles convicted of non-homicide felonies eligible for sentence modification after 20 years.⁵

³ Between 1989 and 2013, at least 18 people whose convictions were based largely on eyewitness misidentifications have been exonerated of serious violent felonies following DNA testing or newly discovered evidence (including several capital cases).

⁴ Virginia’s threshold is the lowest in the country and has not been updated since 1980. Young people are incarcerated for this crime at a very high rate.

⁵ In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled that juveniles could not be sentenced to life without parole. Legislation is needed to provide retroactive justice to individuals sentenced to life without parole prior to the Supreme Court ruling.

Family Life & Freedom of Conscience:

- Supporting measures to connect victims of human trafficking to appropriate services and treatment.
- Strengthening laws against human trafficking.
- Preventing minors' access to pornography.
- Protecting the ability of religious institutions to make personnel, housing, and other decisions that reflect their beliefs regarding marriage.
- Preserving current conscience protections for faith-based child-placing agencies that protect them from being forced to participate in placements that violate their beliefs.
- Supporting legislation, reflecting federal policy, to ensure that state government officials cannot censor sermons in services of worship by chaplains of the Virginia National Guard or the Virginia Defense Force.
- Supporting legislation, reflecting federal policy, to ensure state religious-practice protections for active-duty military members.
- Opposing legislation to include within the state's definition of birth control anything deemed by the FDA to be a "contraceptive."⁶
- Supporting increased funding for post-adoptive services.
- Changing the foster-care "age out" from 18 to 21.

Health:

- Supporting efforts to expand access to health insurance coverage to people up to 133% of the Federal Poverty Level.⁷
- Reducing the waiting list for community-based services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

⁶ The FDA's list of currently approved "contraceptives" includes abortifacients and sterilization procedures.

⁷ This means that an individual makes \$15,521 or less a year.

- Protecting Medicaid reimbursement rates.

Social & Economic Concerns/ Environmental Justice:

- Opposing budget reductions to programs that provide shelter, health care, and other basic necessities to low-income Virginia residents.
- Raising Virginia's minimum wage beyond the federal requirements.
- Making the state Earned Income Tax Credit refundable for the lowest-income taxpayers.
- Closing the open-end line of credit loophole, and regulating lines of credit as other lenders are regulated.⁸
- Requiring Virginia's payday and car-title lending industries to operate under the same annual-percentage-rate cap on interest (36%) as other small-loan lenders operating in Virginia.
- Supporting proposals to increase state contributions to the Housing Trust Fund, and identifying other sources of consistent support for the program.
- Providing state-subsidized rental assistance to working families whose wages do not enable them to afford adequate housing.
- Supporting affordable and accessible housing for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to facilitate the transition from institutions to community-based living.
- Implementing a cost-of-living adjustment for payments to low-income families under the TANF program.
- Opposing the diversion of TANF funding toward non-TANF purposes.
- Supporting a Back to School Supplies and Clothing Allowance for TANF-eligible, school-aged children.

⁸ Many open-end line of credit lenders charge interest rates between 260% and 400% APR.

- Opposing legislation to require local departments of social services to drug test Virginia Initiative for Employment Not Welfare (VIEW) recipients and to make those who test positive ineligible for TANF benefits for one year.
- Prohibiting officers from inquiring about the immigration status of those who report being victims of a crime or witnesses to a crime.
- Compensating victims of Virginia's prior forced sterilization program.⁹
- Maintaining Virginia's moratorium on uranium mining.
- Supporting tax credits for employers who hire individuals with disabilities.

Education:

- Preserving the Education Improvement Scholarships Tax Credits program.
- Advocating that preschools accredited by the Virginia Council for Private Education be recognized as quality early childhood education programs.
- Preserving the current prohibitions against weapons on the property of private and religious schools.
- Preserving eligibility for in-state tuition for immigrant children who have been granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status by the federal government and who meet Virginia's residency requirements.

You can make a difference!

- Sign up for the Virginia Catholic Conference's **Email Advocacy Network** to receive regular alerts and updates on legislative issues. To join, visit www.vacatholic.org, click "Join the Network," and complete the short form that is provided. Alerts include pre-drafted messages that you can send ("as is" or modified to suit your own style) to your elected representatives with just a few mouse clicks. It's effective advocacy with very little time commitment!
- Participate in **Catholic Advocacy Day** in Richmond on Thursday, **January 29, 2015**, from 8:45 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. (with registration beginning at 7:45 a.m.). The day begins with prayer and issue briefings, followed by constituent visits at legislators' offices, "debriefing," and closing prayer. For registration and additional information, visit www.vacatholic.org. Please join Arlington Bishop

⁹ Between 1927 and 1979, about 8,000 Virginians were sterilized under this former program.

Paul S. Loverde and Richmond Bishop Francis X. DiLorenzo at this important advocacy event.

- “Like” the Conference on **Facebook**, follow the Conference on **Twitter** (@VaCatholicConf), and sign up for the Conference’s **blog** (at www.fromthetibertothejames.wordpress.com) for the latest news on legislative issues.