



2009 General Assembly Session: Summary of Key Outcomes

During the 46-day Virginia General Assembly session (January 14 to February 28) and the one day “veto session” (April 8), the Virginia Catholic Conference took formal positions on about 50 bills and budget amendments and focused particular attention on the initiatives described below. Through Catholic Advocacy Day and the Conference’s email advocacy network (sign up at www.vacatholic.org), many Catholics throughout the Commonwealth participated in the political process and, in some cases, played a decisive role in determining final outcomes on legislation.

Biotech Legislation: The Conference lobbied aggressively for the inclusion of bioethical safeguards in legislation designed to boost state investment in biotechnology. The Conference’s goal was to make sure that the legislation could not become a vehicle for financing research that exploits human embryos or aborted babies. After taking many twists and turns throughout the session, the measure ended up in a “conference committee” to resolve differences between the House version (which included pro-life protections) and the Senate version (which did not). Ultimately, the conferees agreed to include provisions in the bill ensuring that the two programs it addressed would not finance (1) embryonic stem-cell research or research on aborted fetuses, or (2) any businesses that conduct such research in Virginia. The conferees’ agreement was approved by the House and Senate as well as the Governor. The Conference supports this outcome as a way to advance positive, life-affirming research and at the same time significantly improve protections for the sanctity of human life and the consciences of state taxpayers in two Virginia biotech-investment programs.

Additional Beginning-of-Life Issues: Conference-supported budget provisions to ensure that no state money would be used to finance abortions, Planned Parenthood, or research that requires the destruction of unborn life were approved by the House of Delegates, but these provisions eventually failed when they were not included in the final budget package approved by the General Assembly and the Governor.

The House also approved two separate Conference-endorsed measures to improve Virginia's informed-consent laws on abortion – one to ensure that a woman considering an abortion would be given the opportunity to view an ultrasound, and another to ensure that she could receive information about a fetus' ability to experience pain. These bills were rejected, though, by the Senate Committee on Education and Health, which earlier in the session also rejected legislation to require that abortion clinics be licensed and inspected and have emergency equipment on hand.

The Senate, House, and Governor all approved the creation of Choose Life license plates (supported by the Conference). A portion of the revenue raised by the purchase of these soon-to-be-available plates will be sent to pregnancy resource centers in Virginia. None of the proceeds will be distributed to agencies involved or associated with abortion.

Death Penalty: For the third straight year, measures that sought to broaden the Commonwealth's use of the death penalty were considered. A total of five bills were introduced this year that, taken together, would have (1) expanded the circumstances under which accomplices could receive death sentences by eliminating the "triggerman rule," (2) allowed the death penalty to be imposed for the murder of a fire marshal or assistant fire marshal with law enforcement powers, and (3) permitted the death penalty for the murder of an auxiliary police officer or an auxiliary deputy sheriff. Although the Conference worked to prevent these expansions, all of them passed the legislature during the regular session. The Governor, however, vetoed all five bills in March. In the weeks leading up to the General Assembly's "veto session" on April 8, the Conference worked to win lawmakers' support for the Governor's decisions. Three of the five expansion measures had "veto proof" support when they were considered during the regular session, but several legislators reconsidered their positions and then opposed the bills during the one-day veto session, enabling the defeat of all five bills.

Human Trafficking: The Conference supported a measure to strengthen the Commonwealth's ability to combat human trafficking – the illegal trade of human beings for commercial sexual exploitation or forced labor. The bill, approved by the General Assembly and Governor, modifies current abduction laws in order to facilitate the prosecution of organizations which commit these crimes. Strengthening Virginia's ability to prosecute human trafficking is expected to be especially helpful in preventing the exploitation of vulnerable immigrants, often teenage girls.

Marriage: A Conference-opposed resolution to repeal the marriage-protection provision in Virginia's constitution (which affirms marriage as "a union between

one man and one woman” and draws a clear distinction between the public institution of marriage and other voluntary relationships) was overwhelmingly defeated in a House subcommittee. Conference-supported legislation to require that Virginia’s public-school curriculum guidelines on family-life education include instruction on the value, benefits, challenges, and responsibilities of marriage was approved by both chambers and signed by the Governor. This proposal was a recommendation of the Family Foundation’s 2007-2008 Marriage Commission.

Education: Conference-endorsed legislation to establish income-tax credits for businesses and individuals who contribute to scholarship foundations or public-school foundations narrowly passed the House and was subsequently defeated in the Senate Committee on Finance.

Conference-supported bills to establish tax credits for school supplies – available to parents of children who attend public or nonpublic schools or who are home schooled – failed in committees in both the House and Senate without recorded votes.

Conference-supported legislation was enacted to eliminate the requirement that a nonprofit entity with gross annual revenue of at least \$1 million must provide an annual financial audit performed by an independent certified public accountant to be exempt from state and local sales and use taxes. Approved by the General Assembly and the Governor, the bill permits those entities instead to provide a (less expensive) annual financial review (performed by an independent CPA).

Budget/Safety Net: The budget approved by the General Assembly includes a \$1 million grant to the Virginia Federation of Food Banks (originally proposed by the Governor in his introduced budget). It also restores 200 “MR waiver” slots that had been eliminated in the introduced budget, and adds an additional 200 slots on top of that. The MR Waiver program provides community-based services for individuals with intellectual disabilities but has a waiting list of several thousand people. The Conference advocated for the expansion of MR waiver slots and the grant for food banks.

Conference-endorsed budget amendments to provide a cost-of-living increase in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits and to provide rental assistance for low-income working families were not approved.

Car-Title Lending: In Virginia, an open-end credit loophole allows unregulated lending. Car-title lenders have been exploiting this loophole to operate unregulated open-end programs that charge rates that can be well in excess of 300 percent (annual percentage rate), often to customers who can least afford them.

Conference-supported legislation to close the open-end credit loophole failed in both the House and Senate, with committee members opting instead to study the issue further later this year.

Voting Rights: In Virginia, people lose the right to vote when convicted of a felony. Currently, only the Governor can restore the right to vote after the individual has completed his or her sentence. Virginia and Kentucky are the only two states with this limitation. A Senate resolution – proposing a constitutional amendment authorizing the General Assembly to provide for the restoration of civil rights for persons convicted of nonviolent felonies who have completed their sentences – passed the Senate but failed in a House subcommittee. The Conference supported the resolution as a way to enable more people to fulfill their moral duty to participate in political decisions affecting human life and dignity and the common good.

To receive regular alerts and updates on initiatives advocated by the Conference on behalf of the Virginia bishops, please visit www.vacatholic.org, click the “Join the Network!” icon, and complete the short electronic form provided.