



SESSION HIGHLIGHTS

Conference fends off religious liberty threats; preserves pro-life laws; advocates for poor, immigrants and students

While legislators considered nearly 4,000 bills and resolutions during the 60-day 2018 Virginia General Assembly session, the Virginia Catholic Conference focused its efforts on legislation to protect the vulnerable and ensure the common good.

Staff will continue to urge protections for the unborn, the sick and others in need when legislators meet to hammer out a two-year budget plan at an upcoming special session.

Here's how Conference priorities fared this session.

Life

Unborn life: Conference advocacy helped defeat eight bills aimed at eliminating most pro-life protections from Virginia law. Committees rejected proposals to strip informed written consent requirements before abortion; repeal hard-won health and safety standards for abortion facilities; expand who can perform abortions and which late-term abortions are allowed; remove abortion coverage restrictions on certain health plans; eliminate the crime of illegally performing an abortion; and assert a “fundamental right” to abortion.

Life-sustaining treatment: Conference participation in a two-year workgroup culminated in passage of patient and health worker protections when conflicts arise regarding course of treatment. The Conference-supported legislation includes strong protections for administration of artificial hydration and nutrition. It awaits the Governor's action.

Death penalty: The Conference supported banning death sentences for people with severe mental illnesses when they committed their crimes. The legislation did not advance, but a committee requested the issue be studied.

Public safety: The Conference called for universal background checks for firearm transfers, but all six proposals failed in committee. Conference-supported proposals to implement risk warrants, which would have enabled judges to temporarily suspend gun rights of individuals posing serious threats to themselves or others, also failed.

Religious Liberty & Institutional Concerns

Health-plan mandates: A top Conference priority was stopping six bills that would have imposed controversial health-plan mandates. All were defeated in committee. One would have

forced unprecedented requirements on employers with religious and moral objections against covering contraceptives. Others, together, would have mandated coverage of contraceptives, sterilizations, gender-transition services, abortion-inducing drugs and some surgical abortions.

Marriage beliefs: Conference-opposed bills – defeated in committee – would have created causes of action against faith-based providers for following their beliefs about marriage and sexuality. Together, these measures would have added “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” to existing anti-discrimination criteria for housing, employment and other areas.

Weapons in places of worship: Virginia law restricts guns and other weapons at places of worship during religious gatherings, unless the carrier has a "good and sufficient reason." Conference-opposed legislation, which shifted the burden to places of worship to keep weapons off their property by express communication, passed the Senate but ultimately failed.

Concern for Poor & Vulnerable

Human trafficking hotline: The Conference supported legislation requiring health departments, highway rest areas, abortion clinics and various health facilities to post the human trafficking helpline poster. It passed and awaits the Governor’s action.

Low-income workers: The Conference continued pushing to make Virginia’s earned-income credit refundable for the lowest-income families, but the bill stalled.

Lending practices: Conference-supported legislation would have regulated internet lenders and capped consumer finance loans at 36% APR. After passing the Senate, it died in a House subcommittee.

Immigrants

Community safety: Conference-opposed legislation purporting to crack down on “sanctuary cities” would jeopardize trust between immigrant communities and local law enforcement and threaten the willingness of crime victims and witnesses to come forward. It narrowly passed and awaits the Governor’s action.

Transportation and education: The Conference worked to expand immigrants’ access to driving privileges and in-state tuition through bills and budget amendments, but those measures failed.

At-Risk Students

Pre-K: The Conference supported legislation to expand Virginia’s Education Improvement Scholarships Tax Credits program to include pre-K students. Thousands of low-income K-12 students receive financial assistance to attend Catholic and other nonpublic schools under the program. The bill would have expanded opportunities to low-income pre-K children, especially where public school options are unavailable. It passed the Senate but failed in a tie vote in a House committee.

Student discipline: Following years of advocacy, modest versions of Conference-supported reforms of inequitable and overly punitive public school suspension policies passed and await the Governor's action.

Care for Creation

Coastal protection: The Conference continued supporting the Virginia Alternative Energy and Coastal Protection Act to fund coastal protections, energy efficiency programs and southwest Virginia workforce development through money raised from regulating carbon pollution. Committees in both chambers narrowly defeated the legislation.

Budget

The Conference will continue advocating for these priorities during the special session:

- Cover all and protect all – to the extent possible provide low-income Virginians access to health insurance and tighten abortion funding restrictions.
- Improve other low-income assistance.
- Reject a program that would push “long acting reversible contraceptives” on low-income women and teens.

To see how your legislators voted, stay tuned for the Conference's 2018 General Assembly session vote charts.

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