



DIOCESE OF ARLINGTON · DIOCESE OF RICHMOND
Representing the Virginia Catholic Bishops in Public Policy Matters

In GA Session, Conference Achieves Conscience Protections, School Choice Benefits; Defends Life at Beginning and End

During the 2014 Virginia General Assembly regular session that ended March 8, the Conference thwarted threats to recent gains for the unborn, and led the defeat of a bill mandating use of the electric chair under certain conditions. The Conference also won strong conscience protections for genetic counselors and a key improvement to a school-choice program. However, budget issues remain unresolved. A special session to resolve differences over the state budget will be convened by Governor McAuliffe on March 24.

The Virginia Catholic Conference thanks those who participated in its Email Advocacy Network as well as the 150 people who attended Catholic Advocacy Day on January 30. Below is a summary of how the Conference's priority initiatives fared.

PROTECTING UNBORN LIFE

Informed Consent. Virginia's strong informed consent law requires a transabdominal ultrasound prior to an abortion. It allows mothers the opportunity to view the ultrasound image, receive a printed copy of the image, and hear fetal heart tones. The Conference opposed multiple bills that would have removed or weakened the transabdominal ultrasound requirement. Those House bills (patrons Delegates Filler-Corn and Ward) were killed in House subcommittees and never reached the House floor; however the Senate bill (offered by Senator Locke) passed the Senate as a result of a procedural fluke but was subsequently killed in a House subcommittee.

Taxpayer Subsidized Abortions on the Health Exchange. Under the Affordable Care Act, Virginia opted to allow the federal exchange to operate as a marketplace for qualified health plans in the Commonwealth. The federal government provides subsidies for people purchasing health insurance on the exchange. These taxpayer subsidies, intended to make health plans more affordable, are tiered based on need from 133% of the federal poverty level to 400%. Last year, the General Assembly passed the "abortion opt-out provision" which prohibits qualified health plans operating on the exchange from offering coverage for abortion-on-demand. Abortions would be covered only in cases of danger to the life of the mother, rape, or incest. The Conference opposes all government funding of abortion and opposed several bills that sought to

repeal this protection against taxpayer-funded abortion-on-demand. The Senate defeated the bills sponsored by Senators Locke and McEachin, while the House version (patron Delegate McClellan) was defeated in committee.

DEATH PENALTY

Default Electrocution. The House passed Conference-opposed legislation (offered by Delegate Miller) providing that electrocution be used to administer the death penalty if the Department of Corrections certifies that lethal injection drugs are unavailable. This bill passed the House; however, the Senate Rehabilitation and Social Services committee voted to continue the bill to 2015, effectively killing the measure for the year. Similarly, the Senate Courts of Justice committee voted to continue to 2015 a companion bill sponsored by Senator Carrico.

EDUCATION

Scholarships Tax Credits Program. The General Assembly approved and the Governor signed an important Conference-supported improvement to the Education Improvement Scholarships Tax Credits program, allowing the 65% tax credit to be claimed for the same taxable year the donation was made. This measure was patroned by Senator Stanley in the Senate and Delegate Massie in the House. Previously, the program's one-year delay to the tax year in which the credit could be claimed discouraged some potential donors from participating. In the 2013-2014 school year, 80 students enrolled in Catholic schools with scholarships raised through this program. To make a donation, contact the Diocese of Arlington Scholarship Foundation at (703) 841-2764 or the Diocese of Richmond's McMahon Parater Foundation at (804) 622-5190.

IMMIGRATION

Tuition Equity Act. Multiple patrons in both chambers proposed Conference-supported legislation to grant in-state tuition status to immigrant children who have been granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals status by the federal government, have attended a Virginia high school for three years, and provide proof that they or their parent/legal guardian filed Virginia income tax returns for three years. [The DACA program allows children who entered the United States before their 16th birthday and have never committed a crime to remain lawfully present in the U.S. for a renewable period of two years.] This legislation would have allowed qualified students the same opportunity as their peers to access higher education at Virginia's public colleges and universities. Unfortunately, the House and Senate bills both failed to move out of committee.

CONSCIENCE PROTECTIONS

Conscience Clause. Two bills that provided licensing procedures for genetic counselors and included strong Conference-supported conscience protections passed the General Assembly.

These protections ensure that no counselor will be forced to be involved in counseling that conflicts with his or her religious or moral beliefs. After signing the companion House bill into law, the Governor proposed an amendment to the Senate bill to weaken the conscience language. The Conference opposed the amendment, and the Senate rejected it, opting to take a strong stand to protect conscience.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Minimum Wage. Multiple bills were filed to raise Virginia's minimum wage beyond the federal requirements. The House bills (offered by Delegates Morrissey and Plum) were tabled in a House committee. However, the Senate bill (patron Senator Marsden) that proposed to raise Virginia's minimum wage to \$8.25 an hour by July 1, 2014 and to \$9.25 an hour by July 1, 2015, passed the Senate only to be defeated in a House committee. The Conference supported the bill as a positive step toward ensuring a living wage for workers to support themselves and their families and respecting the dignity of work.

BUDGET ITEMS

During the regular session, the Conference advocated that the state budget include:

- Healthcare that covers everyone and protects everyone, born and unborn;
- Funding for the Housing Trust Fund;
- Funding at the level needed to eliminate waiting lists for Intellectual Disability and Developmental Disability waiver services within ten years;
- Compensation for the still-living victims of Virginia's shameful forced-sterilization program that operated from 1924 to 1979.

The Conference will continue to press these budget priorities during the special session that begins March 24.