



Virginia General Assembly 2016 Session Report

Legislature defunds abortion providers, expands electric chair use, protects religious liberty

Over the course of an action-packed 2016 session, the Virginia General Assembly considered over 2,100 bills and passed a \$105 billion budget in 59 days.

Throughout the long session, the Virginia Catholic Conference met with legislators, testified at countless hearings and spread updates and alerts on social media.

The Conference joined Bishops DiLorenzo and Loverde midway through session to host the first-ever ***Virginia Vespers: Evening Prayer for the Commonwealth***, a beautiful liturgy that drew Governor McAuliffe and the First Lady, as well as other state officials and legislators, and Catholics from throughout Virginia to pray for the needs of the Commonwealth.

At session's end, the Conference was instrumental in passing a measure to deny funding to Planned Parenthood and the abortion industry, blocking efforts to restrict refugee resettlement and expanding conscience protections for religious organizations who believe the truth about marriage.

The Conference also successfully advocated for budget amendments to help unclog a waiting list for essential services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, assist youth who age out of foster care and expand affordable housing options and assistance to families in need.

Unfortunately, a bill to expand use of the electric chair also passed, though it was opposed aggressively by the Conference and other anti-death-penalty advocates.

Here's a more detailed look at key 2016 legislative priorities that consumed much of the Conference's lobbying and grassroots activities:

Defunding Abortion Industry: The Conference and pro-life advocates worked throughout the session to ensure passage of a bill that would prohibit the state from contracting with or providing grants to Planned Parenthood and other providers of abortion on demand. The bill also would divert public health funds away from the abortion industry and toward vital community health centers. The measure sailed through the House 64-35 and passed the Senate by a close 21-19 vote. A growing number of state legislatures have moved to strip the abortion business of state funds in the wake of horrific videos released last summer that show Planned Parenthood officials discussing the harvesting and sale of organs and tissue from aborted babies. In Virginia, the bill awaits action by the Governor.

Electric Chair Expansion: The Conference worked tirelessly to oppose a draconian bill that would require the state to electrocute death row prisoners when the Department of Corrections (DOC) certifies -

“for any reason” - that lethal injection drugs are not available. The House passed the bill 65-34, and the Senate followed, passing it in a 22-17 vote.

Electrocution is especially inhumane. DOC should not be given virtually unlimited discretion to mandate use of the electric chair and make it the norm for future executions. The Georgia and Nebraska supreme courts have ruled the electric chair constitutes cruel and unusual punishment. The bill now awaits action by the Governor. If he signs it, it is virtually certain to lead to a court challenge.

Protecting Religious Liberty: In light of nationwide efforts to chip away at religious liberty and conscience protections, the Conference’s top religious liberty initiative this year was a bill modeled after the USCCB-endorsed First Amendment Defense Act being considered by Congress. Though the originally introduced measure was not enacted, a modified version that would still ensure that clergy and religious organizations are not penalized by the government for following the teaching that marriage is between a man and a woman passed the House 59-38 and the Senate by a close 21-19 vote. The bill now awaits action by the Governor.

Caring for Refugees: Consistent with Christ’s command to welcome the stranger, the Conference opposed several bills that would have prevented state agencies from providing assistance for refugee resettlement unless the refugee has been certified by multiple federal agencies as not posing a threat to national security. Refugees already undergo an extensive process of multiple background checks, screenings and security clearances. Placing additional certification requirements on the federal government would effectively halt the efforts of several faith-based organizations that currently assist refugees resettling in the Commonwealth. Fortunately, these bills were defeated in committee.

Scholarship Tax Credit Program: The Conference supported several bills to improve the Education Improvement Scholarships Tax Credits (EISTC) program, including a measure that would increase the number of days scholarship foundations participating in the EISTC program may use to process donations and convert donations of marketable securities into cash. The bill passed the House 65-34 and passed the Senate 21-19.

Additional bills to expand the EISTC program were also considered. One measure, to increase the current tax credit percentage from 65% to 90%, was defeated in committee, while a bill to allow qualified pre-K students to participate in the program was carried over to 2017.

Here’s a look at how other top, though less time-intensive, Conference priorities fared during the 2016 session:

Unborn Life

Preventing Taxpayer-Funded Abortion on Demand: In 2013, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation prohibiting health plans operating on the health exchange in Virginia from providing coverage for abortion on demand. This year, the Conference successfully opposed bills seeking to undo this “abortion opt-out” provision, thereby preserving this critical pro-life gain.

Viewing an Ultrasound: The Conference opposed measures, defeated in committee, to remove the requirement that a transabdominal ultrasound be performed at least 24 hours before an abortion and that the mother be offered the opportunity to see the ultrasound. This important informed-consent law ensures Virginia women are provided a window into the womb before making a potentially tragic and irreversible decision.

Virginia Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act: The Conference again supported a bill to ban most abortions after 20 weeks' gestation, based on substantial medical evidence which shows that unborn children can experience pain at 20 weeks. Unfortunately, the bill did not advance to a vote this year.

Immigrants

In an effort to promote public safety and encourage safe transport of individuals to church, work and school, the Conference supported common-sense legislation that would have allowed the Department of Motor Vehicles to issue driver's licenses to applicants who are currently denied licenses due to their federal immigration status. Several bills were introduced to address various categories of immigrants that are currently ineligible for a Virginia driver's license. While a Senate bill was defeated in committee, three House bills were carried over to 2017 for further study.

Budget Priorities

The General Assembly approved a budget to govern state spending for the next two years. The budget bill now awaits further action by the Governor. The following are budget items that were focal points for the Conference:

Prohibiting Taxpayer-Funded Abortion on Demand: The General Assembly adopted Conference-supported language restoring restrictions against abortion funding that had been in place during the McDonnell administration. Governor McAuliffe had removed these restrictions in his introduced budget.

Eliminating Funding for "Reproductive Education": Legislators eliminated funding for a Conference-opposed program proposed by Governor McAuliffe to aggressively promote and provide "long-acting reversible contraception", such as IUDs and skin implants, to low-income Virginia women and teens.

Expanding Access to Healthcare: The Conference's top healthcare priority is to "cover everyone and protect everyone," born and unborn. Therefore, the Conference supports efforts to restrict abortion funding to the greatest extent possible, while also supporting efforts to expand access to healthcare for the uninsured, whether through the expansion of traditional Medicaid or via market-based alternatives. Unfortunately, the General Assembly eliminated funding proposed in Governor McAuliffe's introduced budget to expand Medicaid to some 400,000 uninsured Virginians. Expanding Medicaid eligibility would help hospitals throughout the state that are struggling financially. Moreover, it would provide a vital safety net for those who lack access to affordable health insurance.

Disability Waivers: The approved budget provides 1,210 Medicaid waiver slots to provide essential services to Virginians with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including housing, medical and personal care services. This Conference-supported provision helps alleviate a long waiting list for disability services.

Expanding Services for Children in Foster Care: The General Assembly included funding for foster care services for young adults up to age 21. This Conference-supported program will help youth leaving the foster care system with housing and other support services.

Health Wagon: Proposed by Governor McAuliffe in his introduced budget, legislators included \$200,000 over the next two years for the Health Wagon, a nonprofit organization providing mobile primary-care services to the medically underserved in Southwest Virginia. This important organization is supported by an annual collection in Diocese of Richmond parishes, and serves thousands of patients, 70% of whom have no insurance.

Housing: The budget also includes a Conference-supported amendment to provide \$11 million for the Housing Trust Fund. This much-needed funding will assist needy Virginia families in securing safe, affordable housing. An additional \$4.3 million is provided for permanent supportive housing for Virginians with mental illness and disabilities.

Increasing TANF Benefits: Legislators included a Conference-supported amendment to fund a 2.5% increase in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits to help low-income Virginia families with the rising costs of living.

Increasing Child Support Supplements: The General Assembly's approved budget includes a Conference-supported amendment providing \$4.8 million for a child support supplement of up to \$100 per month for families receiving TANF benefits.

Want to see votes your legislators cast this year on important bills? Stay tuned: The Virginia Catholic Conference's 2016 General Assembly vote charts will be available soon!