



2017 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 2017 Virginia General Assembly session, which convenes for 46 days beginning on January 11. 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 29, 2016, by its Management Committee. [NOTE: *Other items may be added to the Conference’s agenda as legislation is filed and reviewed.*]

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Respect Life:

- Diverting public funds away from the abortion industry and toward genuine healthcare.
- Banning state funding of all abortions not required by federal law.¹

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.

- Preserving pro-life gains made in prior years.
- Supporting the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act.²
- Supporting resolutions recognizing that human life begins at conception.
- Opposing proposals to expand the death penalty.
- Making those with severe mental illness ineligible for the death penalty.
- Closing Virginia's "gun-show loophole" by requiring unlicensed gun sellers at gun shows to conduct background checks on potential purchasers.³

Family Life/Freedom of Conscience/Institutional Concerns:

- Protecting the ability of religious institutions to make personnel, housing, benefits and other decisions that reflect their beliefs (e.g., regarding the sanctity of life and marriage).
- Preserving freedom of conscience for health-care providers and families that choose to engage in sexual orientation change counseling.
- Opposing legislation to include within the state's definition of birth control anything deemed by the FDA to be a "contraceptive method." [The FDA's list of currently approved "contraceptives" includes abortifacients and sterilization procedures.]
- Opposing second-parent adoption by non-marital partners.
- Supporting creation of the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program to facilitate child placements with relatives and ensure permanency for children for whom adoption or return home are not appropriate.
- Preserving the vital assistance to communities provided by the historic rehabilitation tax credit and the Neighborhood Assistance Program.

² This bill, if enacted, would add to Virginia law constitutionally permitted protections for unborn children from the stage at which substantial medical evidence indicates they are capable of feeling pain.

³ 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.

Refugees & Immigrants:

- Opposing attempts to block refugee resettlement in Virginia.
- Supporting access to driver's licenses for immigrants unable to be issued one, under certain circumstances.

Health/ Social & Economic Concerns/ Consumer Protections:

- Supporting efforts to expand access to health insurance coverage to people up to 133% of the Federal Poverty Level.⁴
- Supporting state funding for the Health Wagon, a nonprofit providing mobile primary-care services to the medically underserved in southwest Virginia.
- 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 Earned Income Tax Credit refundable – allowing low-income taxpayers to receive a share of their state earned income tax credit (EITC) in the form of a refund when their income is so low that the credit exceeds their state tax liability.
- Supporting measures to connect victims of human trafficking to appropriate services and treatment.
- Closing the open-end line of credit loophole, and regulate lines of credit as other lenders are regulated.⁵
- Requiring Virginia's payday and car-title lending industries to operate under the same annual-percentage-rate cap on interest (36 percent) as other small-loan lenders operating in Virginia.

⁴ This means that an individual makes \$15,800 or less a year.

⁵ Many open-end line of credit lenders charge interest rates between 260% and 400% APR.

- 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.
- Prohibiting discrimination based on veteran status or use of financial assistance in the provision of housing.
- Reducing the waiting list for community-based services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- Supporting the allowance of overtime pay for consumer-directed caregivers who help people with disabilities live independently.
- 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.
- Lifting Virginia's lifetime ban on food stamps for those convicted of drug-distribution felonies.
- Breaking generational cycles of poverty by allowing the transfer of unspent TANF monies into 529 Virginia College Savings Plans for children of parents who are drug free, become employed and are no longer collecting TANF benefits.
- Protecting Medicaid reimbursement rates.

Education:

- Enhancing 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.
- Supporting the creation of a statewide virtual school.

- Prohibiting the expansion of allowed weapons on school property.
- Supporting the addition of a vaccine to prevent meningitis to Virginia's existing vaccination policy for school students.

Criminal & Juvenile Justice and Community Re-Entry:

- Restoring voting rights to individuals convicted of non-violent felonies who have completed their sentences.
- Prohibiting commissions from being paid to Virginia for inmate phone services, and requiring telephone systems in state correctional facilities to charge the lowest possible rates and not impose additional costs or fees.
- Increasing the minimum threshold for the crime of "grand larceny" from \$200 to \$500 or \$1,000.
- Making juveniles convicted of non-homicide felonies eligible for sentence modification after 20 years.

Environmental Justice:

- Supporting legislation to mitigate coastal flooding.
- Opposing legislation to stall the adoption of a state plan of compliance with the federal Clean Power Plan standards.