



2015 General Assembly Session Report

During a whirlwind 2015 session, the Virginia General Assembly considered over 2,000 bills and made significant adjustments to the state budget, all in just 45 days. The Virginia Catholic Conference (www.vacatholic.org) was ever-present throughout this flurry of activity – behind the scenes, through testimony at hearings, on social media platforms, and by providing timely opportunities for constituent involvement. By the time the dust settled, Conference advocacy had been instrumental in the stunning defeat of a secretive execution drug proposal, and in the passage of vital measures to fight sex trafficking, protect religious speech, and compensate victims of a reprehensible forced-sterilization program that had been part of Virginia’s past history.

Here is a more detailed look at these key 2015 legislative victories:

Secretive execution drug bill defeated! The Conference labored for much of the session against a bill, pursued aggressively by the state Department of Corrections, that would have given special secret status to pharmacies to compound execution drugs from scratch using undisclosed materials. Ironically, this measure was proposed in the wake of recent botched executions in Arizona, Ohio, and Oklahoma that demonstrate the need for more transparency, not less. Early efforts to defeat the bill were unsuccessful, however. In fact, its passage seemed almost certain after being approved 23-14 on the Senate floor and then 12-6 in a House committee. But on the House floor, Delegates LeMunyon and Surovell led a highly effective debate that accentuated many of the bill’s legal and anti-transparency problems. Persuaded by this momentum-shifting debate, legislators on opposite ends of the political spectrum and on both sides of the death penalty issue joined together to defeat the bill in a decisive 56-42 vote – an outcome that was surprising to many and even shocking to some.

Forceful anti-sex-trafficking measure approved! Virginia had been the only state in the nation without a stand-alone statute against sex trafficking. Thanks to Conference advocacy in coalition with a diverse array of partners, that will change. Legislation approved by the House and Senate this year clearly defines the crime of sex trafficking and provides stiff penalties against perpetrators. Moving forward, it will be an indispensable tool for law enforcement in stopping this horrendous crime and protecting vulnerable victims.

Chaplains' sermons protected! Building on previous religious liberty gains, this year one of the Conference's top initiatives was a measure to prohibit state officials from censoring the religious content of sermons made by chaplains of the Virginia National Guard or the Virginia Defense Force. Parties with various perspectives on the bill agreed to a helpful amendment that provided important clarifications and alleviated concerns that had been expressed when this proposal was considered last year. With these clarifications, the bill then sailed through the Senate and House unanimously.

Forced-sterilization victims to be compensated! Between 1924 and 1979, more than 7,000 Virginians were robbed of their dignity and human rights through state-ordered sterilizations. This year, the General Assembly set aside \$400,000 so that the still-living victims of this shameful program could receive some compensation for the grave injustice done to them. Capped at \$25,000 per victim, this funding can hopefully provide some small measure of healing to victims, though no amount of money can restore their loss. This state budget allocation – the culmination of a three-year push by the Conference and various advocacy partners – makes Virginia the second state to provide compensation to victims of compulsory sterilizations.

In addition to these highlighted successes, the Conference pursued a number of additional high-priority initiatives this year. Here is a brief look at how those priorities fared:

Unborn Life

Preventing taxpayer-funded abortion on demand: Two years ago, the General Assembly passed Conference-supported legislation (the “abortion opt-out provision”) prohibiting health plans operating on the health exchange in Virginia from offering coverage for abortion on demand. This year, Conference advocacy helped defeat a bill seeking to undo this provision, thus preserving this essential pro-life gain.

Viewing an ultrasound: The Conference lobbied against bills, defeated in committee, that would have watered down the informed-consent law requiring a doctor to perform a transabdominal ultrasound at least 24 hours prior to an abortion and offer the mother a chance to view the ultrasound.

Virginia Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act: Substantial medical evidence shows an unborn child can experience pain at 20 weeks after fertilization. However, a Conference-supported bill to ban most abortions from that time onward did not advance to a vote this year.

Death Penalty

Introduced legislation would have limited Virginia's death penalty to cases in which there is biological, DNA, or video evidence that connects the defendant to the offense. The Conference supported this effort to restrict capital punishment, but it was voted down 10-3 in committee.

Marriage

The Conference opposed measures, all defeated in committee, to strike state laws affirming marriage as the union of one man and one woman. Conference testimony emphasized the importance of respecting the will of more than one million Virginia voters who decided in 2006 to add this provision to the state constitution, and the prudence of not acting before the U.S. Supreme Court reviews lower court marriage rulings.

Immigrants

Conference-opposed legislation that would have denied in-state tuition to immigrant youth was defeated 20-19 on the Senate floor. The bill would have prohibited students lawfully present in the U.S. via Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status from receiving in-state tuition even if they meet all other requirements for Virginia domicile.

Healthcare/Safety Net

Closing the coverage gap: Conference healthcare advocacy seeks to “cover everyone and protect everyone,” born and unborn. Therefore, the Conference supports efforts to restrict abortion funding to the greatest extent possible. It also supports efforts to expand access to healthcare coverage for the uninsured, whether by expanding traditional Medicaid or alternatives, such as a public-private partnership or market-based proposals. Virginia has some of the strictest Medicaid eligibility requirements in the nation and ranks 48th in per capita contributions to Medicaid. Unfortunately, the General Assembly did not further restrict abortion funding (see *Budget Priorities*), nor did it close the coverage gap.

Eliminating lifetime ban on TANF benefits: The Conference supported legislation to lift the lifetime ban on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits for individuals with prior drug convictions who have completed their sentences. However, it was defeated in committee.

Education

Seclusion and restraint regulations: Conference-supported legislation, passed with overwhelming support in both chambers, directs the state Board of Education to adopt and implement regulations for the use of seclusion and restraint techniques in Virginia's elementary

and secondary public schools. These dangerous techniques have often been used on students with physical and intellectual disabilities and have sometimes resulted in serious injury to them.

Prohibiting concealed handguns at schools: The Senate defeated Conference-opposed legislation that would have allowed concealed handguns on public, private, and religious school property outside of designated school hours. Fortunately, the bill was defeated 20-18 on the Senate floor. The Conference and Catholic school officials support keeping the current law in place against concealed handguns on school property.

Budget Priorities

Defunding Medicaid abortions: The General Assembly failed to adopt a Conference-supported budget amendment that would have blocked state funding for abortions done because the child might be born with a disability. The federal government subsidizes abortions for women enrolled in Medicaid when the life of the mother is in danger and in cases of rape and incest. Virginia is among a minority of states that also provides state funding for women enrolled in Medicaid to obtain abortions in these other cases. The Conference opposes all abortion funding and supports efforts to eliminate it to the fullest extent possible.

Health Wagon: The General Assembly adopted a Conference-supported budget amendment allocating \$126,000 in additional funding to the Health Wagon, a nonprofit organization providing mobile primary-care services to the medically underserved in Southwest Virginia. Supported by the Diocese of Richmond, the Health Wagon serves more than 2,500 patients. More than 70% of Health Wagon patients have no insurance.

Housing: Approved budget amendments provide Conference-supported funding of \$1 million for Rapid Re-Housing programs and \$8 million for the Housing Trust Fund, which provides grants to affordable housing projects statewide as well as permanent supportive housing projects to decrease homelessness. Last year, the budget eliminated funding for the Housing Trust Fund.

Increasing TANF benefits: A Conference-supported budget amendment provides more than \$1 million to support a 2.5% increase in TANF benefits. These benefits had not been increased since the year 2000.

Want to see votes your legislators cast this year on important bills? Stay tuned: The Virginia Catholic Conference's 2015 General Assembly vote charts will be available soon!