



Update Midway Through General Assembly Session

By Jeff Caruso, Executive Director, Virginia Catholic Conference

The 2024 Virginia General Assembly session began Jan. 10 and is scheduled to end March 9. Feb. 13 was “crossover”, the date after which – with the exception of the budget – the House can only consider bills that have passed the Senate and the Senate can only consider bills that have passed the House. Crossover is generally considered the halfway point of session, and this article provides a look at where key issues stood a few days afterward (as of Feb. 18).

This update begins with some good news. The following legislation that the Virginia Catholic Conference (VCC) supports is moving forward: bills to make prescription drugs more affordable for low-income families and seniors on limited fixed incomes, place clear limits on the practice of isolated confinement in prisons, increase the minimum wage, increase immigrant children’s access to healthcare, and reduce gun violence. In addition, VCC-opposed legislation that would have brought the death penalty back to Virginia failed.

However, the news is anything but good – and is indeed very alarming – in other areas. Extremely harmful and dangerous legislation that the VCC strongly opposes is also advancing. Several bills that would shield abortion providers in Virginia from criminal or professional liability for violating other states’ pro-life laws are nearing final passage. These “abortion shield” bills are focal points of advocacy on Virginia Pro-Life Day (Feb. 21). Measures to require health plans to cover contraceptives and even some abortifacients – with no exemption for employers with religious or moral objections – are also close to passage, as is legislation that would allow commercial surrogacy brokers to operate in Virginia. If the surrogacy broker bill were to become law, it would violate the dignity of women recruited by profit-driven brokers, and it could lead to more trafficking of women and children. The Senate and House have also each passed their own versions of legislation to create a commercial marketplace for marijuana. The VCC opposes the marijuana commercialization bills because of the substantial risk they pose to public health and safety.

VCC-opposed Senate and House legislation attempting to legalize physician assisted suicide has been another issue of heightened concern this session. In a Feb. 5 statement and call to action against the assisted suicide bills, Bishop Burbidge and Bishop Knestout emphasized that “human life is sacred and must never be abandoned or discarded” and that assisted suicide “makes the most vulnerable even more vulnerable.” The legislation narrowly passed the Senate but fortunately did not pass the House. The VCC continues to monitor this issue.

The VCC is grateful to everyone who has taken action on key alerts this session. **If you are not already receiving action alerts and updates from the VCC, please visit www.vacatholic.org, click “Join Us!” and sign up to participate in the email advocacy network.**

The Virginia Catholic Conference is the public policy agency representing Virginia’s Catholic bishops and their two dioceses.