

focus

2013-2014 ADVOCACY PRIORITIES

"The separation of church and state does not require division between belief and public action, between moral principles and political choices, but protects the right of believers and religious groups to practice their faith and act on their values in public life."

—Catholics in Political Life, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

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With the start of the 97th Michigan Legislature, which began in January and runs through 2014, several pressing policy issues will come before elected members of the Michigan House of Representatives and the State Senate. This session, Republicans control both chambers of the Legislature with a 59–51 majority in the House and a 26–12 edge in the Senate. The Republican Party also controls the four constitutional statewide offices: Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General and Secretary of State. Regardless of which party maintains the majority, public policy issues pertaining to religious liberty, human life and dignity, immigration, children and families, health care and education will always be at the forefront of the Michigan Catholic Conference's advocacy agenda.

Last session several important measures were addressed that promote the health and safety of women, expand school choice, provide greater funding for low-income heating assistance, modify the manner by which indigent persons are granted public counsel, and uphold the dignity the undocumented deserve as human persons. While a few of these policies were passed and signed into law, there is significant work to be accomplished in the 2013–2014 session, especially in the areas of religious liberty and human life.

For example, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (otherwise known as

federal health care reform), specifically allows states to prohibit abortion coverage in any state or federal health care exchange created by the law. More than a dozen states have already enacted such a measure and it is a priority for the Michigan Catholic Conference to ensure that no person is unwittingly forced to pay for another person's abortion. Equally important is the protection of individual and institutional conscience rights, especially in the fields of health care and child placement services. Society is markedly different from years past when a Catholic institution freely operated as such, yet in some sectors of the greater community Catholic organizations are under attack, sometimes in a hostile fashion, because of the Church's teaching on protecting human life, immigration and the traditional definition of marriage. This reality has moved into the legislative arena as efforts are regrettably underway to push Catholic social service agencies out of the public sphere.

The purpose of this **focus** publication is to highlight Michigan Catholic Conference's advocacy priorities for the 2013–2014 legislative session. While some of the policies mentioned may be addressed this legislative session, it is likely that additional policies of interest to the Conference will come forward that may not be included in this publication. Staff will evaluate those policies based on whether or not they promote the common good and take action as deemed necessary. ■

Religious Liberty

Perhaps no right parallels the founding of the American republic more closely than the freedom of religion. Over 200 years of executive action, legislative efforts and judicial opinions have ensured that government does not intrude on the internal affairs of religious organizations. The constitutional right for Americans to practice their faith, and to serve others in their faith tradition, is as important today as it was when the nation was in its infant stages. To that end, the Conference supports:

- The rights of faith-based providers and all individuals to conscience protections in the delivery of services,
- The equal application of the law to all persons and institutions regardless of their faith, and
- Opposition to insurance regulations mandating coverage for abortion, or contraception, or sterilization.

Human Life & Dignity

As the nation this year acknowledges the 40th anniversary of the tragic 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* Supreme Court decision, public opinion data indicates more people, especially younger generations, are becoming increasingly pro-life. Yet the intrinsic evil of abortion remains engrained in the nation's fiber. Catholics and others of goodwill work each day to change hearts and minds, one at time, so that the collective American soul will increase its respect and value for all human life: the unborn, the elderly and infirm, the embryo and the destitute. In the public policy arena, the Conference supports:

- State initiatives that provide alternatives to abortion and assistance to pregnant women,
- Measures to limit abortion and promote the safety of women,
- Regulations on human embryo research, and
- Upholding the constitutional ban on the death penalty and the statutory ban on assisted suicide.

Education

One of the greatest tools available to form a human being, to eradicate poverty and to enhance a community is a good education. Coupled with the presence of a strong and supportive family life, educational policies that ensure children are always and in every situation placed above adults or institutions are essential. A major obstacle that must be overcome to eliminate discrimination in education is Article VIII, Section II of the Michigan Constitution, which prohibits state aid to non-public schools and prevents elected officials from passing effective and proven policies. Education reform that benefits all students in public schools, along with equal treatment under the law for non-public schools, must be recognized and pursued. To this end, the Conference supports:

- Reimbursement to non-public schools for state required mandated services such as health and safety
- Requirement that all public school districts have open enrollment policies.
- Policies that seek to improve the quality of public education
- Mandatory consultation between public school districts and the non-public school districts located within their jurisdiction regarding the appropriate distribution of federal program dollars. Equitable participation in federal programs should also continue in districts that are undergoing reform efforts,
- Protection of non-public schools from excessive regulation,
- Preservation of the Michigan Tuition Grant Program, and
- An end to the state constitutional ban on aid to non-public schools.

Children & Families

The permanent and loving relationship between one man and one woman through the bond of marriage stands as mankind's most significant and vital institution. Open to the creation of offspring for the sake of future generations, originated by history and not religion, the sacrosanct covenant of marriage allows for family and community life to thrive within a society built on justice for all. Thus, policies that strengthen and promote traditional marriage and the family must be encouraged. MCC supports:

- Upholding the constitutional definition of marriage,
- Policies that protect the stability of the marriage bond and the institution of the family,
- Amending Michigan's no-fault divorce laws.

Health Care

In 2014 the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act is to be fully implemented, however, significant concerns still exist related to abortion funding, conscience protections and how undocumented persons receive health care. In Michigan, legislative efforts to protect Medicaid funding for poor and elderly persons will be critical, as will ensuring that health care policies do not threaten life or restrict the right to conscience. Justice demands that medical assistance be easily available for all, including and especially low-income populations. In the area of health care, the Conference supports:

- Protection of health coverage for low and moderate income individuals and families,
- Appropriate Medicaid funding to ensure adequate coverage for recipients and payments to providers,
- Legislation that prohibits abortion funding in all health plans, and
- Opposition to legislation that threatens the institutional integrity of faith-based providers.

Economic Justice & Regulatory Policies

In Matthew's gospel Jesus says: "the poor you will always have with you." In all places and at all times Christians are called upon to work for those least among us, to uplift the poor and to help create opportunities through which our brothers and sisters may carve their paths in life. Policies that provide essential support for the destitute must be upheld as elected officials annually meet a constitutional obligation to balance the state budget. Thus, the poor and disadvantaged must be among legislative priorities when state revenues are appropriated. The Conference supports:

- The allocation of scarce budget resources to preserve essential services for vulnerable persons,
- Affirmation of the recognized right to exercise religious conscience in the provision of publicly-funded services,
- Maintenance of the tax-exempt status for not-for-profit organizations,
- Affordable housing for low and moderate income families and individuals, and
- Affordable and accessible transportation options for low and moderate income workers.

Restorative Justice

Our task as a society should be to restore a sense of civility and responsibility to everyday life, and to promote crime prevention and genuine rehabilitation. The common good is undermined by criminal behavior that threatens the lives and dignity of others and by policies that give up on those who have broken the law. The Michigan legal system must hold offenders accountable and challenge them to change their lives, reach out to victims and reject vengeance, restore a sense of community, and resist the violence that has engulfed so much of our culture. In an effort to advance restorative justice, the Conference supports:

- Adequate and professional legal representation to all accused individuals regardless of economic status,
- The right of faith-based providers in the delivery of services to incarcerated individuals, regardless of citizenship,
- Reforming and enhancing the provision of health care services provided in Michigan prisons, including end of life care,
- A comprehensive approach to prisoner rehabilitation and re-entry programs that includes continuing education, adequate personal identification, transportation, housing, and employment assistance,
- Sentencing guidelines and parole practices that reflect an individual's potential threat to society, including amending Michigan's mandatory minimum sentencing statutes impacting juveniles and certain drug offenses, and
- Elimination of life without parole for juveniles convicted as adults.

Immigration

According to a July 2011 statement from the bishops in Michigan: Because Congress has yet to develop a comprehensive immigration policy, the reality is that state legislatures are attempting to address this issue. We acknowledge the state's authority to enact its own legislation; however, continued failure at the federal level to enact comprehensive immigration reform does not mean that the state should pursue policies more appropriately addressed by national immigration authorities and the United States Congress. Should our state policy-makers debate immigration legislation we, as moral leaders and teachers of faith, believe any proposed measure must strive to:

- Uphold the human dignity of all persons and work against any injustice which would compromise the dignity of immigrants, and
- Promote and give priority to the reunification of families.

Federal Issues

As Michigan Catholic Conference is primarily a state-based advocacy organization, federal issues will be addressed in collaboration with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Only when the usccb has taken a position on an issue will the MCC engage with the Michigan congressional delegation. Among the many pressing and critical issues addressed by Congress, the following are of significant, immediate concern:

- Efforts to overturn the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services mandate that requires all employers to add objectionable services to health benefits offered to employees,
- Legislation that extends full legal protection to individuals and institutions regarding conscience rights in the field of health care and all employment decisions,
- Comprehensive immigration reform that, among additional policies, promotes family unity, and
- Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

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