



Legislative Report – 2006 General Assembly Session

The report that follows describes legislative and budgetary measures that were focal points of Virginia Catholic Conference advocacy during the 2006 regular and special sessions of the General Assembly. The Conference is the public-policy representative of the Catholic bishops serving the dioceses of Arlington and Richmond.

The 60-day 2006 Regular Session of the Virginia General Assembly adjourned on March 11th without an approved budget for the 2006-2008 biennium. To resolve differences between House and Senate budget proposals, Governor Kaine called a Special Session, which began on March 27th. For almost three months, an 11-member “conference committee” remained at an impasse over those differences. On June 16th, however, the conferees reached an agreement, which the General Assembly approved the following week.

Abortion/Stem-Cell Research:

Shortly before Governor Mark Warner left office in January, he submitted to the General Assembly a budget proposal that included \$255 million for research and development at Virginia’s colleges and universities. As originally drafted, this research-and-development initiative provided no ethical standards to prevent use of the proposed funds for research that requires destroying human embryos or fetuses. The Conference supported budget language prohibiting state investment in such research. The provision was adopted by the House of Delegates but not by the Senate. Ultimately, it was not included in the conference committee report approved by the full General Assembly.

The House also adopted an amendment supported by the Conference to prevent state funding of Medicaid abortions. However, that provision was not added to the Senate version of the budget, and it was not included in the final conference committee report.

Two abortion-related bills supported by the Conference passed the House by large margins but were rejected in identical 9-to-6 votes by the Senate Education and Health Committee. One measure would have required abortion clinics to be licensed by the state and subject to regulations applicable to other ambulatory surgery centers; the other would have required doctors to file a report with the state health department each time they treated a patient who suffered a medical complication resulting from an induced abortion. [The patient's identity would not be revealed.]

Death Penalty:

In the wake of a U.S. Supreme Court decision banning use of the death penalty on those under 18 at the time of the offense, Virginia has officially wiped the juvenile death penalty off its own books, thanks to enacted legislation supported by the Conference. However, three Conference-opposed measures that sought to expand the circumstances under which a defendant could be eligible for the death penalty also passed the House before being "continued to 2007" (*i.e.*, tabled until the 2007 General Assembly session) by the Senate Courts of Justice Committee, so that a commission on crimes could study them during the interim. The most publicized of the three "continued" bills would have made those involved in capital murders who were not the actual perpetrators (*i.e.*, not the "triggermen") eligible for death sentences.

Justice for Immigrants:

Bills introduced this year would have restricted the ability of undocumented immigrant children (who entered the country with their parents) to attend state colleges and universities, even if they graduate from Virginia high schools. By opposing these measures, the Conference sought to avoid denying these children educational opportunities because of decisions their parents made. The House passed one bill to prohibit these children from attending public colleges and another measure to deny them in-state tuition. The Senate, meanwhile, approved legislation that would have permitted undocumented children to receive in-state tuition at public higher-education institutions if they graduate from a Virginia high school, have applied to become permanent U.S. residents, and have parents who have filed Virginia income-tax returns for at least three years prior to enrollment. Once each of these bills "crossed over," they met defeat in the opposite chamber.

Low-Income Families / Safety-Net Services:

Bills to increase the state's minimum wage and establish a partially refundable earned-income tax credit for low-income workers failed to advance beyond the committee level. Conference-supported funding initiatives, however,

fares better. Prenatal care for low-income women was expanded by \$2.8 million; the St. Mary's Health Wagon will receive \$100,000 over the next two years to help sustain the vital safety-net services it provides to indigent residents of southwest Virginia; and Meals on Wheels will benefit from a much needed \$750,000 increase to provide more home-delivered meals to vulnerable seniors.

Marriage:

For the second straight year, both chambers approved a Conference-backed resolution defining marriage as between one man and one woman and prohibiting the recognition of legal statuses that would equate unmarried relationships with marriage. This November, Virginia voters will decide whether the provisions of this resolution will be added to the Constitution of Virginia. The Virginia bishops strongly support the proposed constitutional amendment, and the Conference will provide pertinent materials to all Virginia parishes this fall.

Parents and Schools:

Legislation pursued by the Conference to authorize local school boards to provide bus transportation to nonpublic-school students passed the House by a 79-to-20 margin but was defeated in the Senate Education and Health Committee, which also rejected an identical measure last year. Other legislation introduced in both the House and the Senate sought to establish income-tax credits for business entities and individuals who make contributions to public-school foundations or scholarship foundations. Under these measures (supported by the Conference), individual taxpayers could also receive income-tax credits (up to \$800 for an individual filer and up to \$1200 for joint filers) for their children's education-related expenses. The House bill "crossed over" but was then continued to 2007 by the Senate Finance Committee. Earlier in the session, the Senate bill stalled in the same committee.