

CAPITOL

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REPORT



The Newsletter of the
Wisconsin Catholic Conference

WCC Opposes Physician Assisted Suicide

Arguing that physician assisted suicide involves the taking of human life and weakens rather than strengthens the bonds of human solidarity, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference testified in opposition to a proposal to permit physician assisted suicide in Wisconsin.

Senate Bill 151 would require that an attending physician satisfy a patient's request for medication to end his or her life so long as that patient meets certain statutory requirements and submits a written request for the medication.

Associate Director for Respect Life and Social Concerns, Barbara Sella, presented the WCC's testimony at a January 23rd hearing before the Senate Committee on Public Health, Senior Issues, Long Term Care and Privacy.

"Assisted suicide raises questions that are profoundly personal and heart wrenching. Yet, it is in these very moments that we are most in need of principles to guide our choices and to define the limits of our actions," Sella testified.

"The first of these principles is that human life is sacred, a gift with which we are endowed by God. Hence, it is inalienable," she argued. Sella reminded the Com-

mittee that the nation's Founders recognized this "self-evident" proposition and President Lincoln reaffirmed its importance at Gettysburg.

Sella next pointed to the inherently social nature of human life. "We humans, by our nature, are bound to each other. Any decision that violates basic rights or that devalues life affects other types of behavior and other choices. Such decisions are never a purely private matter or choice."

Sella then continued to refute claims that this legislation simply upholds individual free choice.

"Human freedom and personal choice are not absolute values or rights...The law places some limits on freedom and choice in the interest of protecting human life and dignity."

"If our law does not recognize a person's choice to become a prostitute or a slave, how can it permit her to use the argument of freedom in order to be killed? Personal freedom and choice cannot trump the inalienable right to life."

Sella pointed to the Netherlands where doctors have helped non-

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Director's Corner

John Huebscher, Executive Director

This issue of our newsletter follows the end of the 2007-08 legislative session. Except for a short "housekeeping" session for remedial bills in May, and any unforeseen special session, the work of lawmaking is pretty well finished for the year.

As a result, this is a good time to say "thank you" to the many people who made our work possible over the 15 months of the session.

Thank you to our small but highly efficient staff of Cathy Coyle-Kaufmann, Barbara Sella, and Kim Wadas for the hours of research, one-on-one lobbying, proofreading, and the many other tasks essential to the work we do.

Thank you to the leadership and staff in our dioceses, parishes, and Catholic institutions for the "expert testimony" and analysis they provided when we sought their advice on how proposals might affect the Church in our five dioceses.

Thank you to the Communications Directors, the Social Action/Respect Life Officers, and the diocesan newspapers who helped us get the word out to Catholics in the parishes and others in the community.

Thanks to all those Catholics around Wisconsin for the phone calls they made or letters they wrote to legislators and others. These grassroots efforts are the Catholic "voice" that our political leaders heed when they decide policy issues.

This thank you is accompanied by the reminder that "faithful citizenship" is an ongoing obligation that involves sustained involvement in policy debates. Together, that involvement will continue throughout 2008 and into the future.

WCC Backs Minimum Wage Boost

On February 27, the WCC urged the Assembly Committee on Jobs and the Economy to support an increase in the minimum wage. If enacted, Assembly Bill 274, authored by Rep. Cory Mason (D-Racine) and others, will boost Wisconsin's minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour. Currently the minimum wage is \$6.50 an hour.

In endorsing the bill, WCC Executive Director, John Huebscher, noted that the right of every person to a job is grounded in the twin responsibility to develop (at a minimum) one's own God-given skills to the fullest and to provide for one's own needs and those of one's family.

"This is why Catholic social teaching has long defined a just wage in terms of a 'family wage,' or that necessary to meet the needs of a family," he said.

AB 274 is identical to Senate Bill 130 authored by Sen. Russ Decker (D-Weston). The WCC offered testimony in support of that bill as well.

Human Trafficking Ban Passes

The legislature has passed a bill to toughen penalties for human trafficking in Wisconsin. Senate Bill 292, authored by Sen. Spencer Coggs (D-Milwaukee) and Rep. Suzanne Jeskewitz (R-Menomonee Falls), passed the Senate February 26 by a vote of 32-0, and the Assembly by a voice vote two days later. Prior to passage, the Senate amended the bill, removing a provision that would have required records be kept on the number of trafficking prosecutions.

Late last year, the WCC offered testimony in support of the bill and its companion, Assembly Bill 544, at public hearing. (See the Fall 2007 *Capitol Report* for a detailed summary of this legislation.)

In February, WCC Executive Director, John Huebscher, and leaders of the Wisconsin Jewish Conference, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, and the Lutheran Office for Public Policy, also wrote a letter to members of the Joint Committee on Finance urging them to pass this bill.



SAVE THE DATES Catholics at the Capitol 2009



March 31, 2009 or April 21, 2009

Monona Terrace Convention Center
Madison, WI

WCC Urges Legislature to Keep Ban on Abortion

This past session, the WCC testified in opposition to Senate Bill 398, sponsored by Sen. Mark Miller (D-Monona) and others, which would repeal the section of state statutes that makes abortion illegal, section 940.04. Though unenforced since the 1973 Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, the law would go back into effect if the Court overturns its ruling in *Roe v. Wade*. SB 398 was the subject of a public hearing in the Capitol on February 27.

Barbara Sella, WCC Associate Director for Respect Life and Social Concerns, told the Senate Committee on Health, Human Services, Insurance, and Job Creation that even though Wisconsin's ban on abortion cannot be enforced, it nonetheless has value.

"Laws do more than prohibit certain behaviors. The law is also a teacher, helping the community attain its highest aspirations. Wisconsin's abortion ban reflects our state's progressive and humanitarian tradition that all human beings – whether born or unborn – deserve to be treated with equal respect."

Sella noted that over the past century, Wisconsin has led the nation in protecting the vulnerable from exploitation. Reforms such as child labor laws, the minimum wage, the creation of child welfare programs, civil rights laws, and family leave laws have all increased the protection of groups that otherwise risked being harmed by the more powerful.

"On the day that *Roe v. Wade* is overturned, Wisconsin will once again be at the forefront of states that protect the most vulnerable of all – the unborn," she added.

Sella also rebutted a main contention of the bill's sup-

porters that leaving s. 940.04 on the books will mean women will be imprisoned for having an abortion if the practice again becomes illegal.

"Let me be equally clear as to what will not happen when *Roe* is overturned. Women who have abortions will not be put in jail." She noted that Wisconsin Statutes s. 940.13 protects women who abort from prosecution. "The WCC fully supports s. 940.13," Sella affirmed. "The aborted child is not the only victim of an abortion. Women are also victims and they deserve compassion, not incarceration."

Studies show that most women who have abortions are likely to be young, less educated, and of limited means. Sella urged the Committee to focus on eliminating the conditions that lead women to abort, rather than repealing the state's abortion ban.

"Catholic teaching holds that the solution to poverty and illegitimacy is not abortion, but love and responsibility, justice and solidarity. Women and their unborn children deserve the right not only to a safe birth, but also to a safe and dignified life – to sufficient nutrition, housing, education, health care, and employment," she said. "These issues should be the focus of our public policy efforts, not the defense of abortion."

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Wisconsin Catholic Conference

131 W. Wilson Street, Suite 1105
Madison, WI 53703
Phone: 608/257-0004 Fax: 608/257-0376
E-mail: office@wisconsincatholic.org
Website: www.wisconsincatholic.org

WCC Staff

John Huebscher, Executive Director
Cathy Coyle-Kaufmann, Administrative Assistant
Barbara Sella, Associate Director for Respect Life/Social Concerns
Kim Wadas, Associate Director for Education/Health Care

Assembly Passes Partial-Birth Abortion Ban, Senate Doesn't

A bill to ban the practice of "partial-birth" abortion passed the State Assembly on February 28 by a vote of 59 to 38. However, the Senate failed to take up the proposal in the final days of the legislative session.

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference backed the measure and offered testimony in its support at a January 31st hearing in the Capitol.

Assembly Bill 710 sponsored by Rep. Jim Ott (R-Mequon) would modify existing state law, currently deemed unconstitutional according to a U.S. Court of Appeals ruling, and align Wisconsin's statute with valid federal law banning partial-birth abortions. The Assembly Committee on Judiciary and Ethics heard testimony for several hours on Assembly Bill 710, including a statement prepared and presented by WCC Associate Directors Barbara Sella and Kim Wadas.

It is estimated that there are about half a dozen partial-birth abortions in Wisconsin every year. However, the number could be much higher. Nearly 13,000 abortions are performed in Wisconsin every year, but there is no official recordkeeping of the abortion method used.

"In a democracy such as ours, we uphold the principle that we are all created equal, and endowed by our Creator with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," Wadas noted. "Mother and child share these fundamental rights. Rather than destroying the child in order to uphold the mother's

right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness, we need to look for different ways to uphold the rights of both."

The WCC recognizes the plight of women who may seek abortions. "We do not close our eyes to the suffering and despair of women who are facing an unwanted pregnancy," said Wadas. "In fact, it is precisely in helping women that we can best help their unborn children."

However, society must address the plight of pregnant women by changing the current legal climate that exists in Wisconsin, which equates access to partial-birth abortion with proper care for women and children. It is for this reason the WCC advocated for AB 710 and is disappointed the Senate did not consider this bill.

Assisted Suicide, *from page 1*

terminal patients commit suicide – patients who were symptom free or severely depressed, and some who did not voluntarily consent to ending their lives. As of 2004, this included the euthanization of newborns with serious disabilities, like severe spina bifida.

Sella concluded her testimony by stressing the proper response to those who are nearing death. "As individuals and as a society, we can and must comfort dying persons and reassure them that we value their continued presence. We can and must tell them that their dependency does not diminish their inherent dignity. We can and must affirm that their lives still matter."