

# CAPITOL

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# REPORT



The Newsletter of the  
Wisconsin Catholic Conference

## Hundreds Attend *Catholics at the Capitol*

Over 365 Catholics from around the state gathered on March 31 in Madison for the fifth *Catholics at the Capitol*. Held every two years, at the start of each legislative session, this day of education and advocacy is organized by the Wisconsin Catholic Conference.

This year's keynote speaker, Bishop Paul J. Swain of Sioux Falls, emphasized the importance of faith-based advocacy. "We must live out our faith in all ways, including in the public square," he said.



*Catholics at the Capitol* participants braved stormy skies to visit legislators.

Catholic Herald – Madison photo: Kat Wagner

"There's a restlessness in society, a sense that everything isn't right." He criticized the use of "sound bytes" and the "over-simplifying of complex problems" in our culture, where violence is "seen as the answer to problems." The Church, he explained, offers the antidote: the teachings of Jesus Christ, "offered with love."

Bishop Swain urged Catholics to

be faithful citizens, but warned that the Church should be alert not to be used by special interest groups nor to be tied to any personality or political party. Sometimes the Church needs to sit out, he explained, so that when it stands, it is noticed. He stressed the importance of being informed and engaged citizens. "Know what the Church teaches and why. Keep fixed on the mission. Practice charity. Be faithful personally. Then you'll be witnesses of hope in action."

Participants that day were able to

choose from thirteen different breakout sessions, which covered the principles of Catholic social teaching, socially conscious parishes, alternatives to abortion, health care reform, payday lending, criminal justice, immigration, medical ethics, family life, conscience rights, W-2 reform, unemployment, and environmental justice.

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## Director's Corner

John Huebscher, Executive Director

As you noticed on Page 1 of the newsletter, this is our first edition of the Capitol Report since our March 31<sup>st</sup> *Catholics at the Capitol* event. So this is my first opportunity in this column to thank those who made the trip to Madison that day, as well as those who could not, but who continue to support our advocacy efforts.

We on the WCC staff were a bit concerned that our bleak economic conditions would cut into the turnout. The 2007 event drew a crowd of 370 and I for one doubted we would match that total.

But match it we did. The size and enthusiasm of this year's gathering was extraordinary. Both the turnout and commitment of Catholics from all across our state are testaments to a widespread faith and dedication to the social mission of the Church.

The hundreds who attended, volunteered, or spoke at the event came because they knew that people, including legislators, needed a message of hope – and they were needed to deliver it.

They came because they knew that the poor needed them to advocate for a state budget that protects the vulnerable. They came because they knew that unborn children needed their witness in support of life.

They came because they knew that people victimized by predatory lending practices need advocates for better regulation of payday lending operations. They came because they knew that health care workers and others worried about their rights of conscience needed their voice.

Their presence made a difference. Legislators heard their message. They were reminded once again that Catholics can be counted on to speak for those who have no voice.

So we on the WCC staff are grateful to all of you – participants, volunteers, and speakers – who made *Catholics at the Capitol* a success. You showed what "faithful citizenship" is all about.

## Capitol Focuses On Health Care

From the start of this new legislative session, expanding health care coverage has emerged as one of the legislature's central priorities.

Much of this expansion has been tied to new coverage mandates for insurers. Some legislation has been limited to expanding coverage for specific treatments or conditions, such as cochlear implants (Assembly Bill 16 and Senate Bill 27) or autism (Assembly Bill 15 and Senate Bill 3). However, several bills concentrate on reforming the state's insurance laws. These bills would further limit restrictions on coverage due to a person's pre-existing conditions, standardize the insurance application process, expand coverage to certain dependents, and reform how some coverage determinations are reviewed. (Assembly Bills 100, 108, and 118, and Senate Bills 70, 71, and 72).

With the exception of Assembly Bill 118, all of these proposals have already received public hearings, and some, such as the cochlear implant legislation, are close to gaining the Governor's signature.

Insurance mandates are not the only health care reform proposals that have been introduced in the legislature. Two companion bills (Assembly Bill 74 and Senate Bill 45) would create a nonrefundable individual income tax credit for funds tied to health savings amount (HSAs). Neither bill has received a public hearing.

There are also proposals to reform the state's Health Insurance Risk Sharing Plan, HIRSP. These measures have passed quickly through the Assembly and received public hearings in the Senate.

HIRSP allows certain eligible individuals with chronic or serious health conditions, and those who cannot otherwise access health insurance in the private market, to purchase insurance through a program administered by the state. Included in these HIRSP reforms is an alteration of the eligibility requirements for individuals who are having trouble obtaining coverage through the private market, making it slightly easier for them to access the HIRSP coverage. (Assembly Bills 111 and 112, and Senate Bills 73 and 74). Both bills await Senate action.

## *Catholics at the Capitol, from page 1*

The afternoon general session, entitled "Faith and Liberty," involved Bishop Jerome E. ListECKi of La Crosse, Bishop Robert C. Morlino of Madison, State Senator Jim Sullivan (D-Wauwatosa), and State Representative Pat Strachota (R-West Bend) in a discussion of how our nation's legal tradition promotes, limits, and protects religious freedom.

After closing prayers, participants visited the Capitol to lobby their representatives on the WCC's legislative priorities: protecting the poor and vulnerable in the state budget; defending all human life; improving access to health care; and regulating the payday loan industry.

*Article contributors: Mary Uhler and Kat Wagner.*



Bishop ListECKi of La Crosse, Senator Sullivan of Wauwatosa, Bishop Morlino of Madison, and Representative Strachota of West Bend respond to questions posed by moderator and WCC Executive Director, John Huebscher.

Catholic Herald – Madison photo: Kat Wagner

## **Court Ruling Threatens Tax-Exempt Rental Housing**

The viability of housing for low-income families and individuals, including the elderly and people with disabilities, is in serious jeopardy due to a very restrictive court ruling. Advocates for low-income housing are pressing legislators to remedy the situation, either by a budget amendment or by separate legislation.

The problem stems from a recent Dane County Circuit Court ruling and an advisory opinion letter from the state Department of Revenue that give a very narrow definition to the "rent use" provisions of existing state law. The rent use language defines how rental income from a property may be used.

The Court ruled that the only purposes such income may be devoted to are maintenance and debt retirement. This is a standard few rental property owners can meet. As a result of the ruling, many providers of low-income housing in Madison may lose their tax-exempt status and be forced to either close or curtail their services. Moreover, if Madison is

successful in collecting property taxes from these non-profits, it is likely that other cities will try to do the same, possibly affecting Catholic Charities low-income housing programs around the state.

There are a number of options to solve the problem. One is to remove the restrictions on use of rental income altogether. Another would be to create a list of other permissible uses for rental income within the statutes. This could or could not include making property tax exemption contingent on housing following certain income and rent limits. The state could also remove the 10-acre limit in existing law on the amount of exempt property a non-profit may own within a municipality. Tax exemption could also be tied to housing financed by the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority.

WCC and other advocates for low-income families are urging citizens to contact city of Madison officials and their state representatives, asking them to retain the tax exemptions.

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# State Budget Update

Work on the state budget continues as worsening economic news brings promises of more cuts and employee layoffs. In March, the WCC submitted written testimony to the Joint Committee on Finance, arguing that protecting the needy should be the top budget priority. The WCC testimony highlighted a number of issues:

## **Health Care, Children, and Families**

The WCC supports protecting Medicaid, BadgerCare, BadgerCare Plus, Community Aids, the Wisconsin Works program (W-2), the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, and other services that assist the needy. The WCC supports a provision extending W-2 eligibility to women with no other children who are not able to work because of a medically verified at-risk pregnancy. WCC backs a 5% increase in uniform foster care rates, and increased funding for kinship care. The WCC also endorses expanding the Badgercare Plus program to extend coverage to 41,000 childless adults across Wisconsin.

The WCC opposes expanding eligibility for contraceptive services to males, ages 15-44.

## **Education**

The Governor's budget proposes additional regulation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

(MPCP). WCC's position is that stronger standards for teacher qualifications and instructional hours are acceptable. However, some of the proposed regulations, such as new testing requirements and requirements that Choice schools comply with the open meeting laws, are intrusive and should not be imposed on Catholic schools who already use nationally-normed tests.

## **Corrections**

The budget reduces reliance on longer prison terms for nonviolent offenders by transferring some nonviolent offenders from prison to supervision in the community, and by allowing more nonviolent prisoners to earn early release. The WCC supports both initiatives.

## **Domestic Partnerships**

The budget creates a "domestic partnership registry" that allows certain same-sex couples to be eligible for some benefits or services currently available to married couples. The WCC opposes including such a major policy change in the budget, arguing that legislators should "be sure that such a provision does not have the effect of diluting the unique status that marriage enjoys in our laws."