

CAPITOL

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REPORT



The Newsletter of the
Wisconsin Catholic Conference

Bishops Reiterate Opposition to HHS Mandate

Wisconsin's bishops reaffirmed their opposition to a federal mandate that all health insurance plans provide coverage at no-cost for contraceptive and sterilization services.

In a June 15 letter to officials at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the bishops renewed their argument that the religious exemption to the mandate, first announced last year, is flawed. The letter was written in response to a request from HHS for public comment on the agency's plans to accommodate religious entities that object to the mandate.

In its current form, the HHS rule exempts religious groups from the mandate if they employ or serve primarily persons of their own religion. The exemption appears to cover parishes and chanceries, but may exclude Catholic schools, charities agencies, hospitals, and colleges.

The bishops argued that the definition of religious employer is an unacceptable constraint on religious liberty. They also stated that the rule is injurious to Wisconsin Catholics by eliminating the only means of

avoiding a similar mandate in state law.

As they did in their earlier letter, the bishops rejected the narrow scope of religion in the mandate.

"The Catholic faith in Wisconsin, a presence that predates our State's admission to the Union, is not limited to the confines of church buildings," the bishops wrote. "It is at Camp Tekawitha in the Diocese of Green Bay ... It is present in Catholic Charities' financial counseling programs in La Crosse, which serve those struggling to make ends meet. It operates among multiple Catholic entities, such as the Diocese of Madison's Rural Life office, Catholic Charities, and St. Vincent de Paul Councils, which in 2008 joined together to provide mobile disaster assessment and aid to flood-ravaged areas in Wisconsin."

The bishops also cited the Catholic Charities Bureau of Superior's Challenge Center, which serves persons with physical and developmental disabilities, and St. Rafael the Archangel School in Milwaukee, which serves more than 400 students, many of whom are not Catholic.

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June 2012
Vol. 2012 No. 2

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Director's Corner

John Huebscher, Executive Director

All of us are well aware how divisive the past 15 months have been in our state.

The political polarization that played itself out in the latest round of recall elections is obvious to all.

The voters have settled the matter of whether Governor Walker will finish his term. Now we should look to the future. Our state faces important challenges and all Wisconsinites need to face them together.

That means we have to learn how to talk with each other and Catholics can help by modeling the "civil discourse" that is critical to a functioning democracy.

Father John Jenkins, the President of Notre Dame University, offered very timely advice for modeling such discourse in a recent commencement address. He said the most important question in this campaign season is, "Can citizens of the United States learn to express their convictions in more skillful, more respectful ways?"

He went on to say that "if we are determined to keep our convictions free of malice, then I propose that we strive to meet one simple test for public discourse: our attempts to express our convictions should take the form of an effort to persuade."

He also pointed out that if we condemn, as opposed to try to persuade, we are not showing the respect that love demands.

He concluded by urging his audience to affirm their beliefs in ways that "strike a moral contrast with the dominant culture of discourse in the country today."

"If you do this," he said, "you will set a new standard for moral conviction ... – one that will offer hope for reconciling two great human needs: our longing to give full expression to our most passionate convictions and the need for a national unity that can survive the diversity of our views."

Catholics in Wisconsin can help our state if we take Father Jenkins' advice to heart.

2012 Voter Education Resources

As in past election years, the WCC has prepared a series of educational resources to help voters meet their duties as faithful citizens. These resources are based on the U.S. bishops' 2007 statement, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States*.

The materials include a four-week series of bulletin inserts. The series opens with an overview on forming consciences. The remaining three inserts cover six issues that the U.S. bishops identify as particularly pressing in 2012:

- Life & Dignity of the Human Person / Peace & Non-Violence
- Religious Liberty / Immigration Reform
- Marriage & Family / Economic Justice

The WCC also publishes *Guidelines for Church Involvement in Electoral Politics*, to encourage lay participation and to clarify what activities and efforts are appropriate for Church officials and agencies during a political campaign.

Copies of all these voter education materials will be available on the WCC website or from your local diocesan office responsible for issues of social concern by July 1, 2012.

WCC staff are available for parish-based presentations on *Faithful Citizenship* and Catholic social teaching. If you are interested in a presentation for this fall, please contact the WCC office at 608-257-0004 or email us at office@wisconsincatholic.org.

SAVE THE DATE!

Catholics at the Capitol

April 10, 2013

Monona Terrace Community &
Convention Center
Madison, WI

Please join us for this day-long event.
More details in upcoming *Capitol Reports* and
at www.wisconsincatholic.org.

2011-12 Legislative Session Wrap-up

The 2011-2012 legislative session ended with 286 acts signed into law. The following summarizes proposals of interest to the WCC from this past session.

Life Issues. The WCC and other pro-life groups succeeded in passing several pro-life laws, including 2011 Wisconsin Act 217, which establishes new requirements to help ensure that a woman is not coerced into having an abortion. The law also prohibits “webcam” abortions. Another new law, 2011 Wisconsin Act 218, bars health insurance plans that participate in any future state health care exchange from including elective abortions in their coverage.

Several proposals did not advance this session, but are likely to be considered again. These include bills to limit the incidence of infant mortality and to prohibit the sale and use of body parts from aborted fetuses.

Children and Families. The WCC supported 2011 Wisconsin Act 216, which restores flexibility and local control to school districts providing human growth and development instruction. However, the Legislature did not advance a WCC-backed bill to create an indi-

vidual income tax credit for certain adoption expenses.

Education. The WCC backed several new education initiatives that became law. These included laws designating all staff in schools, public or private, as mandatory reporters of child abuse and neglect, altering pupil medication administration duties, and changing the parental school choice programs to institute program expansion and new administrative requirements. The WCC also supported several education tax credit or scholarship programs, none of which passed.

Health Care. The WCC supported removing an enrollment cap on Family Care and related programs that provide long-term community-based support for vulnerable populations. This cap was removed by 2011 Wisconsin Act 127.

Social Concerns. The WCC opposed efforts to impose greater constraints on individuals who cannot provide documentation of legal resident status, as well as an attempt to exempt rent-to-own retailers from adhering to provisions of the Wisconsin Consumer Act. None of the proposals became law.

Bishops Oppose Mandate, *from page 1*

These programs can inject “vital ‘social capital’ into a neighborhood with few economic resources,” the bishops wrote. “They are as central to our identity and mission as those ministries referenced in the exemption for ‘religious employers’ in the Final Rule.”

The letter also argues that the proposed mandate will intersect with Wisconsin law to deny any exemption to many Catholic institutions. Currently these agencies can avoid the state mandate if they self-insure. The federal mandate removes that exemption.

“Excluding a Catholic organization from access to the exemption,” declared the bishops, “denies the essence

of their purpose and violates our rights as a Church under the Constitution.”

The HHS mandate is one of several recent limits on religious liberty that Catholics will highlight during the upcoming Fortnight of Freedom. This fourteen-day observance runs from June 21 through July 4, 2012, and is dedicated to prayer, catechesis, and public action in support of religious liberty.

To obtain a copy of the bishop’s comments, or to learn more about the Fortnight of Freedom, visit the Wisconsin Catholic Conference website at www.wisconsincatholic.org.

CAPITOL REPORT is published quarterly by the WCC to inform Catholics and policy decision makers of the WCC’s activities and positions on state and federal legislation.

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Hopes for Prison Reform

Two recent developments raise hopes that significant reform of Wisconsin's criminal justice system will be debated when the Legislature reconvenes in January.

Last month, Governor Walker announced the creation of a 20-member statewide Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC). The CJCC, co-chaired by the Secretary of the Department of Corrections and the Attorney General, will develop criminal justice policy recommendations to reduce the level of incarceration, improve rehabilitative efforts, reduce recidivism, and protect public safety.

Meanwhile, the faith-based grassroots organization, WISDOM, is continuing its efforts to reduce Wisconsin's prison population by diverting convicted non-violent drug and alcohol offenders to community-based substance abuse and mental health treatment programs.

Wisconsin has a far higher incarceration rate than neighboring Minnesota, which relies more heavily on community-based treatment for individuals with underlying mental health and addiction issues. In 1995, Wisconsin's prison population was around 11,000. Today it stands at about 22,000. In 1990, the Department of Corrections had a budget of \$200 million. Today the budget is \$1.3 billion.

Wisconsin also incarcerates African-Americans at a disproportionate rate. More than 50 percent of

Wisconsin's prison population is Black, even though this group only comprises 6 percent of the state's total population.

In 2005, WISDOM, the WCC, and other advocacy groups were instrumental in passage of the Treatment Alternatives and Diversion (TAD) program. The TAD authorizes annual state grants to select counties for the establishment and operation of community-based programs for non-violent drug and alcohol offenders. The program has been effective in the counties in which it has been implemented.

Now WISDOM and others are supporting a new initiative, "11x15 For Safer, Healthier Communities." The campaign seeks to reduce Wisconsin's prison population by half – to 11,000 inmates – by 2015. The number 11,000 was chosen because it would bring the state's per capita incarceration rate in line with neighboring Minnesota, which has comparable crime rates and demographics.

The bishops of Wisconsin endorse the 11x15 initiative as consistent with past WCC policy positions. Interested citizens are encouraged to learn more about the 11x15 campaign by contacting the WCC.