



RESPECTING LIFE: AFFIRMING THE HUMANITY OF THE UNBORN AND HELPING PREGNANT WOMEN

INTRODUCTION

Compared to the rest of the nation, Wisconsin's abortion rate is relatively low and it continues to decline. Since 1987, when the state began collecting abortion data, the ratio of abortions to live births in the state has declined from 24 per 100 live births to the current 16 per 100 live births. Nationally the ratio is 25 per 100.

The efforts of pro-life supporters have contributed to this decline. Laws such as those that require informed consent and parental consent serve the interests of both women and families as they face the difficulties and stresses that an unplanned pregnancy presents. Wisconsin's relatively generous "safety net" for needy families seems to be another factor. But we can and should do more. These additional efforts to affirm the humanity of the unborn, to help pregnant women and to gather information about abortions in the state will help Wisconsin citizens further respect and care for the most vulnerable among us.

CATHOLIC TEACHING ON HUMAN LIFE

The foundation of Catholic social teaching is the belief that all human life is sacred. Each person is created in God's image and, without exception, has dignity, worth and value that must be protected and respected from conception to natural death.

Because human life is most fragile at the beginning and end of life, we focus particular attention on those members of our human family who are unable to defend themselves. Therefore, in protecting human life, we "begin with a commitment never to intentionally kill, or collude in the killing, of any innocent human life, no matter how broken, unformed, disabled or desperate that life may seem." (*Living the Gospel of Life*, USCCB, 1998)

We foster the value of life when we seek to build a "culture of life" that sees the human person as the "beginning, subject and goal of all social institutions." (#25, *Gaudium et Spes*, Second Vatican Council, 1965) By actively pursuing an agenda committed to the advancement of the human person, fully realized in community with one another, the Church provides a profound witness to the culture of life. That is why the WCC addresses a range of public policy concerns: care for the dying, opposition to euthanasia, concern for pregnant women, protection for the unborn, services for the poor, access to health care, just wages for workers, support for families, opposition to the death penalty, and beyond.

LEGISLATION TO AFFIRM THE HUMANITY OF THE UNBORN

Wrongful Birth / Wrongful Life. SB 71 prohibits claims of wrongful birth or wrongful life in civil litigation seeking damages for the birth of a child. In a wrongful birth or wrongful life claim the claimant argues that an act or omission by their physician interfered with a woman's right to choose an abortion.

As a matter of principle, Wisconsin law should say that no child's life is a mistake or wrong. To declare the birth or existence of any individual as "wrongful" violates this principle.

Unborn Child Pain Awareness Act. The Unborn Child Pain Awareness Act requires women seeking an abortion to be notified that their unborn child experiences pain after 20 weeks gestation. The notification requirement would be added to the Wisconsin "Woman's Right to Know" law. Wisconsin's informed consent law seeks to provide women with information that is relevant to their decision regarding their pregnancy and the pain that an unborn child could experience should be disclosed.

Embryonic Stem Cell Research and Human Cloning. Perhaps one of the greatest opportunities to attest to the value of human life in all stages, even at its earliest formation, is legislation banning embryonic stem cell research and human cloning. This issue is discussed in greater detail in a separate *WCC Issue Brief*.

DOING MORE FOR PREGNANT WOMEN

There are a number of proposals this session to improve laws in Wisconsin to encourage **adoption**, such as increasing the level of financial support that adoptive parents may provide to pregnant women and increasing state tax credits available to adoptive families. The Governor's budget allows for increased access to **prenatal care services** to undocumented women and earlier access to **W-2 support** for women in the third trimester who face particular medical risks. Strengthening Wisconsin's law requiring **parental consent** for abortion would support parents in their role as the primary source of support for daughters and recognize the complexity and gravity of a teen pregnancy.

The WCC supports these initiatives and is in the early stages of developing additional proposals (discussed below) to serve pregnant women.

Abortion Data Collection. Wisconsin currently collects abortion related data pertaining to: age, race, geographical location of abortion, educational level, marital status, type of procedure used (surgical or chemical abortion) and medical complications. However, states like Minnesota collect information that goes beyond this.

In addition to the data listed above, Minnesota tracks: 1) the medical specialty of the physician; 2) previous pregnancies (live birth, abortion, miscarriage); 3) contraceptive use at time of pregnancy; 4) type of payment (fee for service or insurance); 5) reason for the abortion (woman may choose as many reasons as applicable, such as financial concerns, emotional health, fetal anomalies, etc.); and 6) post abortion medical complications.

There is wide consensus that it is desirable to reduce the number of abortions in the state. Better information regarding the circumstances faced by women who procure abortions can assist the state in developing policy responses that reflect the reality of the situations in the lives of these women.

Pregnancy and Parenting Resources for Women in Need. The majority of abortions occur within the 20-29 year old population. Some states, such as Pennsylvania, provide significant resources to counseling programs designed specifically to serve women seeking an alternative to abortion. North Dakota, Florida, and Minnesota are among states that are also considering increasing their investment in services to those facing unplanned pregnancies. This assistance includes information and referral for needed services, ongoing support, and counsel to a woman who may not find support from her family or partner.

Support for Women on Campuses. Since women between the ages of 20-24 account for the largest percentage (34%) of abortions, it is important to target college campus for such resources. The State of Michigan recently passed legislation to establish a pilot grant program that will provide funding to two college campuses to help pregnant women connect with services that will enable them to carry their pregnancy to term. Wisconsin should make similar efforts.

ACTION REQUESTED

- Support bills that affirm the humanity of the unborn such as bills prohibiting wrongful birth/wrongful life claims, prohibiting embryonic stem cell research and human cloning (at a minimum opposing public funding of such research) and the Unborn Child Pain Awareness Act.
- Support proposals that provide services for pregnant women in need including: improvement of Wisconsin's adoption laws, enhancement of Wisconsin's abortion data collection efforts, increased access to prenatal care for undocumented immigrant women and counseling and support services for women facing an unplanned pregnancy who are seeking a real alternative to abortion.

For more information, please contact Kathy Markeland at 608/257-0004.