Last fall the WCC submitted written testimony to the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services in support of Senate Bill 154 (Sen. Chris Kapenga, R-Delafield). The bill would have prohibited the University of Wisconsin (UW) System or the University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority from allowing their employees to perform or assist in the performance of an abortion outside of a hospital setting. Currently, certain UW employees perform elective abortions at Planned Parenthood in Madison.

The WCC statement noted that “Pope Francis has captured the world’s attention for embracing the most marginalized people; for warning against a ‘throwaway culture’ that discards unwanted persons as though they were consumer goods; and for insisting that we can never ‘solve a problem by eliminating a person.’ These are not uniquely Catholic or even religious ideas. They are reflections of the deepest humanity and should inspire all of us to set our sights higher.”

“As the state’s leading medical research and teaching institution, the UW is called to solve problems in a way that upholds human dignity and protects human life. Elective abortion, even if legal, denies the life and dignity of the unborn child. That is not what the Wisconsin Idea is about. Rather than taking human lives, the tradition of our state and the mission of the UW are best served by exclusively healing and saving lives.”

Both SB 154 and its companion bill, Assembly Bill 206 (Rep. André Jacque, R-De Pere), received a public hearing, but neither bill advanced to a full vote in the Legislature.

More recently, Governor Walker signed Assembly Bill 128 (Rep. Jacque) into law as 2017 Wisconsin Act 191. The Act bans abortion coverage in public employee insurance policies by prohibiting Wisconsin’s Group Insurance Board from entering into any contract with respect to a group health plan if, with certain exceptions, the plan provides abortion services to state employees under the Wisconsin Retirement System.

Barbara Sella, WCC Associate Director for Respect Life and Social Concerns, testified in support of AB 128 and its companion bill, Senate Bill 81 (Sen. David Craig, R-Town of Vernon). While some
Director’s Corner
Kim Wadas, Executive Director

As the current legislative session comes to a close, I want to take this opportunity to say thank you. The WCC operates as the public policy voice for the bishops of Wisconsin, but as staff we couldn’t effectively do our jobs without the countless number of Catholic organizations, programs, projects, individuals, and prayers that aid us in our work.

When I started at the WCC over 10 years ago, a major topic of discussion was health care reform. When meeting with legislators, we emphasized that our experience as a Church offered the unique multi-faceted perspective of employer, advocate, charity, practitioner, and ethicist, as well as representing a general commitment to advancing the common good. However, I now realize this is true for every issue we engage.

We gain insight, knowledge, support, and strength from committed Catholics serving in a wealth of vocations – school and parish leaders, doctors, scientists, lawyers, clergy, leaders of our various Catholic charitable organizations, business owners, dedicated workers, public servants, families, students, and numerous others. Many, such as our state’s men and women religious, serve in several of these roles at once. When the WCC asked you to speak up for the poor and vulnerable, you responded by testifying on the need for ethical fetal tissue research and respect for unborn children, informing legislators about offering and operating low-income housing, providing greater aid to those facing addiction and mental health issues, urging support for refugees, preserving school safety, preventing the spread of predatory lending in Wisconsin, and many other issues.

However, in true Catholic fashion, our gratitude comes with yet another request for assistance. Please continue to be engaged with your elected leaders. Also, consider the call to serve as an elected official. This fall Wisconsin will elect nearly all of its congressional delegates, almost all state constitutional offices, half its State Senators and all State Assembly Representatives. At the county and municipal level, there are elections for sheriff, clerks of court, coroner, and more. Wisconsin is well-served by the wealth of experience and knowledge among its leaders, but a little more never hurt.

WCC Testifies on Palliative Care

The WCC provided testimony for information on Senate Bill 548 (Sen. Terry Moulton, R-Chippewa Falls), which would have established a palliative care council in Wisconsin. The council would have been responsible for analyzing and reporting on policies, practices, and protocols concerning patients’ rights related to palliative care, including the review of practices regarding life-sustaining treatment, advance directives, and informed consent.

As noted in the WCC testimony, the Catholic Church supports the use of quality palliative care for those facing significant health issues. As Pope Francis has said, “Palliative care is an expression of the truly human attitude of taking care of one another, especially of those who suffer. It is a testimony that the human person is always precious, even if marked by illness and old age. Indeed, the person, under any circumstances, is an asset to him/herself and to others and is loved by God. This is why, when their life becomes very fragile and the end of their earthly existence approaches, we feel the responsibility to assist and accompany them in the best way.”

The WCC affirmed that “while having insight from palliative care professionals and advocates on these practices is necessary and important, conversations regarding these issues are broached in numerous settings, including family gatherings, houses of worship, and in consultation with legal counsel.” With this in mind, the WCC requested that SB 548, and its companion bill, Assembly Bill 633 (Rep. Patrick Snyder, R-Schofield), include a wider variety of stakeholders. Ideally the council should have greater representation of those who have personally experienced serious illness, their caregivers, or other advocates.

Finally, the WCC affirmed that any public policy designed to aid those who are vulnerable and facing serious illness must emphasize principles that benefit both the individual and society. Palliative care should never value expediency over life. Nor should our state’s laws encourage a system of care that places undue cultural, financial, or other pressures on an individual to hasten the end of his or her life. The WCC therefore requested that the definition of palliative care, as referenced in SB 548 and AB 633, specifically exclude any attempts to assist in or intentionally hasten death.
Juvenile Justice Offers a Better Path to Reform

In January the WCC testified in favor of Assembly Bill 660 (Rep. Mark Born, R-Beaver Dam) before the Assembly Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. The bill would have returned first-time, nonviolent 17-year-old offenders to the juvenile justice system.

Since 1995, 17-year-olds in Wisconsin who have committed crimes are automatically waived up to adult court, making ours one of only five states in the nation to incarcerate adolescents with adult offenders.

Wisconsin’s bishops, together with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), oppose treating young offenders as adults. Quoting from a 2000 USCCB statement, Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice, the WCC told legislators:

“[S]ociety must never respond to children who have committed crimes as though they are somehow equal to adults – fully formed in conscience and fully aware of their actions. Placing children in adult jails is a sign of failure, not a solution. In many instances, such terrible behavior points to our own negligence in raising children with a respect for life, providing a nurturing and loving environment, or addressing serious mental or emotional illnesses.”

Indeed, medical research on adolescent brain development reveals that the adolescent brain is significantly different from the adult brain. The areas of the brain that affect impulse control and behavioral regulation have not fully developed in adolescents and this helps to explain why adolescents are more prone to risk-taking and dangerous behavior.

Addressing youth in a juvenile setting also promotes good stewardship of both our state’s resources, human and otherwise. Although it costs more to treat an adolescent in the juvenile justice system than in the adult justice system, there is a notable savings in the long run. Children held in juvenile correctional facilities receive an education, substance abuse treatment, and counselling. These services result in lower recidivism rates and a more successful reintegration into civic life. Juvenile offenders also do not face the long-term consequences that adult offenders do, such as being prohibited from receiving federal financial aid to attend university or technical college, facing housing and employment discrimination because of a criminal conviction, or being listed in publicly-accessible Wisconsin court records. In short, a person with a juvenile criminal record is more likely to get an education, find a job, and live a responsible life as an adult.

This legislation had been introduced in previous sessions, but faced opposition because of insufficient funding from the state. However, AB 660 included sufficient funding and not one entity registered or testified in opposition at the public hearing. Even so, AB 660 was not voted on in the Assembly. Its companion bill, Senate Bill 550 (Sen. Jerry Petrowski, R-Marathon) did not receive even a public hearing in the Senate.

Much attention has been paid to the need to reform Wisconsin’s juvenile corrections facilities, but in correcting the failings of the current system, it is important that Wisconsin expand avenues of intervention for young, first-time, non-violent offenders by establishing a system of laws and resources that provide these individuals with opportunities for rehabilitation in their communities. Throughout the coming months, the WCC urges constituents to ask legislators to make it a priority to allow first-time, nonviolent 17-year-old offenders to return to the juvenile justice system.

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have argued that Act 191 will deny women basic health care, Sella noted that “taking a human life is not health care, for it is neither healthy nor caring.” Citing Pope Francis in his encyclical Evangelii Gaudium (Joy of the Gospel), Sella reiterated that a progressive society does not “resolve problems by eliminating a human life…”

The WCC is grateful for the work of legislators, advocates, and individuals all over Wisconsin who supported the passage of Act 191.
Faith-Based and Consumer Advocates Thank Legislators Who Protected Wisconsin Consumers

Organizations representing people of faith and consumers from around the state expressed their gratitude to all those who worked to preserve the Wisconsin Consumer Act (WCA) in the face of efforts by the rent-to-own (RTO) industry to eliminate existing consumer protections. Senate Bill 637 (Sen. Terry Moulton, R-Chippewa Falls) and Assembly Bill 759 (Rep. Warren Petryk, R-Eleva) would have eliminated crucial consumer protections and transparency requirements for RTO customers by exempting the entire RTO industry from the WCA. In opposing these bills, advocates reiterated that the WCA does not ban RTO sales in Wisconsin.

Advocates were grateful for the support of a bipartisan group of legislators who sustained Wisconsin’s tradition of promoting consumer protection and fair business standards. The Committee members who voted against the bill’s advancement were Senators Jerry Petrowski (R-Marathon), Mark Miller (D-Monona), Chris Larson (D-Milwaukee), Kathleen Vinehout (D-Alma), and Patty Schachtner (D-Somerset).

The advocates also thanked all those individuals and organizations who spoke out against these proposed changes to Wisconsin’s consumer protection laws. “Please don’t ever doubt that you can make a difference,” said Wisconsin Catholic Conference Executive Director Kim Wadas, adding, “We hope that the RTO industry finally understands that abiding by the WCA is good for everyone.”

The groups that expressed gratitude for legislative opposition included the WCC, the Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group (WISPIRG), the Wisconsin Council of Churches, End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin, and the Greater Wisconsin Agency on Aging Resources.