2013-14 Legislative Session Summary

The 2013-2014 legislative session ended with 380 acts signed into law. The following summarizes proposals of interest to the WCC from this past session.

Life Issues. The WCC supported the passage of Act 37, which requires an ultrasound before an abortion. A second provision of the Act, requiring abortionists to have admitting privileges at local hospitals, has been stayed while awaiting a judicial decision.

A number of other pro-life bills advanced past their public hearings, but did not pass in the end. These include permitting license plates with the words “Choose Life” and banning sex-selective abortions. A bill exempting religious employers from the state’s contraception mandate also did not pass; however, the Office of the Commissioner of Insurance (OCI) recently announced that it will defer to the Supreme Court’s ruling in Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. when enforcing the state mandate.

Children and Families. The WCC supported Act 334, which extends foster care to young people until age 21, up from 19, as long as they have individualized education plans (IEPs) in place. The WCC also supported a bill to protect pregnant workers, but this bill did not advance.

Education. The WCC provided information-only testimony on Act 256, which was originally designed to reform school accountability measures for public, charter, and parental choice schools, but ultimately only sped up the timeline for implementation of student information systems in parental choice schools.

The WCC also supported an unsuccessful effort to create a Special Needs Scholarship Program for children with disabilities who wish to attend schools other than their designated public schools.

Health Care. The WCC offered testimony with other religious groups on Acts 116-17, which involved eligibility changes to BadgerCare programs. The religious leaders emphasized that Medicaid must continue to be made available to all those who are poor or vulnerable in Wisconsin.

Social Concerns. The WCC supported Act 362, which strengthens Wisconsin’s laws against human trafficking and gives greater protections to victims.

Please turn to page 4
Among the many blessings of advocating for the Catholic Church on policy issues are the quality of the people and the depth of their experience available to us as we form and articulate our positions.

These were very well represented in a discussion on poverty in Wisconsin (see page 3) with our Policy Group last April. That discussion was deeply enriched by five people, one from each of our state’s five dioceses. Each of these individuals devotes their lives to serving the poor. Their ministries vary, but together they witness the different ways in which Catholics serve the needy in our communities.

Ted Phernetton directs Catholic Charities for the Green Bay diocese. He brings a broad perspective and years of experience in both the public sector and the non-profit side of the street. Ralph Middlecamp has been director of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Madison for over two decades. MaryeBeth Dugan directs the Nehemiah project in Milwaukee, a program that helps at-risk youth. Anh Tran sees the face of the poor from the vantage point of his work with the Place of Grace Catholic Worker House in La Crosse. Deacon Michael Cullen serves rural poor as a Pastoral Associate for three parishes in Barron and Polk Counties in the Superior diocese.

Each of these people offered insights based on their program knowledge. Just as important, they spoke “from the heart” about the flesh and blood realities facing people every day in our communities. Their daily efforts offer invaluable assistance to the needy persons they help. Their counsel and advice offers invaluable insights to those of us who try to translate that experience into advocacy for programs and policies that can make things better for those in our society who need our help.

None of these people seek headlines or recognition for what they do. But their efforts, and those of others like them, are why the Catholic Church enjoys credibility on matters of poverty and issues affecting the vulnerable in our state.

2014 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’ 2011 statement, Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States.

The materials include a six-week bulletin insert series:

- Letter from Wisconsin’s Bishops / Review of Catholic Social Teaching
- Forming Consciences
- Life & Dignity of the Human Person / Peace & Non-Violence
- Religious Liberty / Immigration Reform
- Marriage & Family / Poverty & Economic Justice
- Candidate Question Card

The WCC also publishes Guidelines for Church Involvement in Electoral Politics, which encourages lay participation and clarifies what activities and efforts are appropriate for Church officials and agencies during a political campaign.

Copies of all these voter education materials are available on the WCC website or from your local diocesan office responsible for issues of social concern.

WCC staff is 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.

“The earth is our common home and all of us are brothers and sisters. If indeed the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsibility of politics’, the Church cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice’.”

—Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, 183
WCC Plans to Address Poverty in 2015

Poverty remains an important issue in Wisconsin and the WCC is planning to make efforts to reduce poverty an important part of its 2015 legislative agenda.

The planning began in late April when Dr. Timothy Smeeding, Director of the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) and Professor of Public Affairs and Economics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, gave a presentation on “Measuring State Poverty and Policy Impacts within Wisconsin” to the WCC Policy Group.

Smeeding’s conclusions were based on the IRP’s sixth annual report, “Wisconsin Poverty Report: Jobs Recover to Help Reduce Poverty in 2012.” The report indicates that 11 percent of children (144,700) and 7.4 percent of elders (61,000) in Wisconsin lived in poverty in 2012. Furthermore, while the overall poverty rate in 2012 was an estimated 10.2 percent (or about 585,700 people), the state had pockets of deeper poverty. Milwaukee County (18.8 percent), Dane County (12.5 percent), and the northwest counties (14.6 percent) had higher poverty rates than the state average.

Dr. Smeeding explained that poverty can result from economic and demographic changes. Economic changes include employment issues (job availability, low wages, limited job skills, and poor working conditions) and instability (shaky finances, intermittent work, little-to-no credit, no emergency reserves, and lack of a financial safety net).

Demographic changes that can cause poverty include unmarried and complex families (41 percent of births are out-of-wedlock) and immigration (both foreign and domestic). He noted that marriage is a crucial “commitment device” for children.

Dr. Smeeding concluded that while it is difficult for governments to control the economy, the following are effective in reducing poverty: 1) early childhood education and health, 2) vibrant non-profits and religious institutions, 3) high school graduation, and 4) a strong social safety net.

Dr. Smeeding’s presentation and Q&A were followed by a panel discussion with guests who work with needy populations from different perspectives. The panel included Deacon Michael Cullen who works with rural poor in northwestern Wisconsin, MaryeBeth Dugan, Director of Nehemiah Project in Milwaukee, a program to help ex-offenders reintegrate into society, Ralph Middlecamp, Director of St. Vincent de Paul Society in Madison, Ted Phernetton, Director of Catholic Charities, Green Bay diocese, and Anh Tran from the Catholic Worker House in La Crosse.

Panel members offered a number of useful suggestions for reducing poverty. They said it is important to spread “Catholic know-how” to the larger community. They noted that a century or more ago, Catholic immigrant groups responded to the plight of the poor by building social capital and institutions of mutual support. It is important for Catholics to share such social capital and know-how with those facing poverty today.

WCC staff intends to pursue these suggestions and other policy proposals through the WCC’s policy agenda for the 2015-16 legislative session.

Reyes to Keynote Catholics at the Capitol 2015

Every two years, the WCC and several Catholic organizations host Catholics at the Capitol, where Catholics from around the state converge in Madison for a day of formation and legislative advocacy. The event will once again take place at the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center on Wednesday, April 8, 2015.

The keynote speaker will be Dr. Jonathan J. Reyes, Executive Director of the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Dr. Reyes is a graduate of the University of Michigan and earned a Ph.D. in European History at the University of Notre Dame. In 2009, Dr. Reyes became the President/CEO of Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of Denver. He also helped found the Augustine Institute of Denver, a graduate program devoted to theological studies and leadership training.

The WCC invites everyone to take advantage of this unique opportunity to pray with fellow Catholics, learn more about Catholic social teaching, and visit with policy makers in the State Capitol. Additional details and registration materials will be provided in the coming months.
For up-to-date information, join the WCC’s free e-advocacy network and get the bi-weekly *Capitol Update*.

Visit [www.wisconsincatholic.org](http://www.wisconsincatholic.org) to sign up!

**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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**Session Summary, from page 1**

The WCC expressed concerns in testimony for information-only on Act 115, which reverses a law outlawing race-based nicknames, logos, mascots, and team names. The efforts of the WCC and other advocates were not successful in returning nonviolent, first-time 17-year-old offenders to juvenile court. Indications are that the next budget may include the necessary funding to make this change possible.

**2014 Legislative Special Study Committees**

The Legislative Council is one of five nonpartisan legislative service agencies of the Wisconsin Legislature. One of its responsibilities is to provide nonpartisan legal, scientific, research services, as well as administrative support services, to legislative study committees, standing committees, and task forces. Between each legislative session, the Joint Legislative Council Committee asks members of the Legislature to serve on Legislative Council special study committees along with select members of the public, who have special expertise in the issue at hand. This interim, there will be eight special committees. Of particular interest to the WCC are the following:

- Special Committee on Adoption Disruption and Dissolution
- Special Committee on Problem-Solving Courts, Alternatives, and Diversions
- Special Committee on the Review of Criminal Penalties
- Special Committee on the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) Program

In the course of the 2015-16 session, many of the recommendations made by these committees will be drafted and introduced as separate bills. Due to the collaborative and public process with which the special committees operate, the legislative proposals that they develop have a greater chance of being signed into law.