Wisconsin is one of the worst states in our country in terms of human trafficking involving both sex and labor trafficking, speakers told over 220 persons attending the biennial Catholics at the Capitol held March 28 at the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center in downtown Madison.

“Human trafficking is happening in counties all over Wisconsin. It happens everywhere, in rural and urban areas and online,” said keynote speaker Colleen Stratton, a survivor of human trafficking and member of the Eye Heart World Outreach Team.

The meeting, sponsored by the Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), is aimed at educating Catholics about important issues of the day and affording an opportunity to pray and work together for the common good in society, and culminated with the opportunity for attendees to visit the State Capitol and meet with their legislators.

Bishop Robert C. Morlino of Madison began with a morning prayer service and welcomed those attending, thanking them for coming. He told them that the state’s bishops are “grateful to have you as partners,” adding, “I hope that today’s activities will help us grow in solidarity in our great state.”

Prior to Stratton’s talk, Sr. Francis Bangert, OSF, from the Sisters of St. Francis of the Holy Cross, Green Bay, provided an overview of human trafficking in Wisconsin. She said human trafficking is called “modern slavery and a prison without walls.”

In Wisconsin, the Fox Cities, Green Bay, and Milwaukee are areas where much sex trafficking is occurring, although it is happening everywhere in the state. Approximately 800,000 children in the U.S. are reported missing each year, with 26,000 missing in Wisconsin. About a third of those become involved in sex trafficking.

Emily Anderson, communications director of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother from Oshkosh presented, “Practical ways to end human trafficking” referring those attending to the website of U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking, www.sistersagainstrafficking.org

The WCC conference also included morning and afternoon breakout sessions with presentations examining issues that advance the common good,
Director’s Corner
Kim Wadas, Executive Director

For over 20 years, Wisconsin has mandated that all 17-year-old offenders be adjudicated in the adult system. Today, however, there is a collective acknowledgment among medical professionals, corrections officials, social scientists, and legislators across the political spectrum that 17-year-olds belong in the juvenile justice system, particularly those who are first time, nonviolent offenders. Because the adolescent brain is still being formed, the age appropriate programming found in the juvenile system is the best way to rehabilitate a young offender and reduce recidivism.

Furthermore, adolescents in the juvenile system continue their high school education, whether in their own communities or in a detention center. This leaves them far better equipped to reenter society than those who languish in adult institutions. Finally, adolescents are far more likely to reoffend, be victimized, or attempt suicide when they are housed in adult institutions.

Past efforts to return first time, nonviolent 17-year-old offenders to the juvenile justice system have received broad bi-partisan support, but ultimately failed to pass due to fiscal constraints. While the cost of detaining adult prisoners falls on the state, the cost of detaining most juvenile offenders falls on local government. Recognizing these fiscal challenges, the WCC joins other advocates in urging the Legislature to ensure that the funding necessary to return first time, nonviolent 17-year-old offenders is properly allocated to the juvenile system.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus brings before the disciples a small child and affirms the virtue of being child-like. After which, He proclaims, “And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me.” Let us not forget those who are among the most vulnerable. Please take the time to talk with lawmakers about returning first time, nonviolent 17-year-old offenders to the juvenile justice system. Ask legislators to include this change as part of the state budget bill, and if it is not changed through the budget process, ask your legislators to introduce and support separate proposals to make this necessary change a reality.

WCC Supports Protecting Human Life

The WCC offered testimony in support of Assembly Bill 128 (Rep. André Jacque, R-De Pere) before the Assembly Committee on Health. The bill would prohibit Wisconsin’s Group Insurance Board from entering into any contract with respect to a group health insurance plan or providing a group health insurance plan on a self-insured basis if, with certain exceptions, the plan provides abortion services to state employees under the Wisconsin Retirement System.

In her testimony, Associate Director for Respect Life and Social Concerns, Barbara Sella, noted that passing AB 128 would align the state’s employee health insurance system with the Federal Employee Health Benefits Program, which does not provide abortion coverage. Sella also observed that “twenty-one states restrict abortion coverage in public employee insurance plans, including our neighbors, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio…” The Committee advanced the bill.

At a public hearing before the Senate Committee on Judiciary and Public Safety, the WCC testified in opposition to Senate Bill 169 (Sen. David Craig, R-Big Bend), which would eliminate firearms training requirements and permit carrying firearms in more places, including schools, unless those locations post signs. Larry Haas, Associate Director for Education and Health Care, noted that “if SB 169 were to pass, the amount of handguns present on schools grounds and in school zones would likely increase. This proliferation of guns is a cause for concern, not because it will likely unleash a wave of intentional violence, but because a greater prevalence of guns is associated with greater numbers of accidental or unintentional firearm injuries and deaths.”

The WCC called for maintaining the current safe zones for schools and the training requirement for concealed weapons. It also called for expanding the list of mandatory gun-free buildings to those used for religious purposes or that serve families, children, and other vulnerable individuals.
WCC State Budget Priorities

In February, Governor Walker introduced his proposed biennial state budget for 2017-19 (Senate Bill 30 and Assembly Bill 64). Between now and July, the Legislature will review the Governor’s proposal, as modified by the Joint Committee on Finance, and consider amendments to it.

While the WCC does not take a position for or against the state budget as a whole, it recognizes that budgets are moral documents through which our state makes choices and sets priorities. The WCC therefore does address aspects of the budget that advance or hinder important moral principles. For Catholics, two vital principles are respect for the life and dignity of the human person and promotion of the common good. More specifically, every public policy should be measured by how it addresses the needs of the poor, disadvantaged, and marginalized so that they can have the opportunity to lead dignified lives and participate as fully as possible in the life of the community.

Several budget provisions uphold these principles and deserve to be included in the final document, while others do not and should be removed. The WCC asks that the following budget items be retained:

**EITC Expansion.** Expands the state’s Earned Income Tax Credit, which benefits working parents with low incomes, in tax year 2018, increasing the EITC for parents with one child from 4 percent to 11 percent of the federal EITC. Newly married couples may also avoid tax penalties. Poverty scholars, including the University of Wisconsin Institute for Research on Poverty, acknowledge that the EITC has a significant impact on helping families fend off poverty.

**Education Funding.** Increases K-12 education funding by $649 million over the two-year budget period and provides commensurate increases for private parental choice programs.

**Children and Family Aids.** Increases aid to families, including increased Children and Family Aids allocation by $5 million annually starting in 2018; increases foster care rates; and eliminates the “fiscal cliff” in child care subsidies by allowing families participating in Wisconsin Shares with incomes above 200 percent of federal poverty level to continue in the program with graduated copayments.

**Child Survivors of Sex Trafficking.** Increases by $2 million in fiscal year 2018-19 treatment services to sex-trafficked children.

**Criminal Justice Reform.** Increases funding for the Treatment Alternatives and Diversion program, as well as for similar programs in counties. Provides greater opportunities for employment by increasing support for the Windows to Work (W2W) and the Opening Avenues to Reentry Success (OARS) programs.

**Transitional Jobs.** Increases by $1 million in 2019 the Transitional Jobs initiative for four rural counties, a program which provides subsidized employment and related services for low-income individuals.

The WCC asks that the following budget items be removed:

**Drug Testing of Public Benefits Recipients.** Expands drug testing requirements for new W-2 recipients. The WCC strongly opposed similar measures last session. While the WCC supports helping people escape drug dependency and embrace healthy and responsible lifestyles, these kinds of measures fail to recognize that drug abuse affects all income levels and that most of those in drug treatment programs relapse several times before achieving lasting recovery. Nor is the partial payment that will continue to a recipient’s child likely to help alleviate family hardship.

**Homestead Tax Credit Changes.** Like the EITC, the Homestead Tax Credit aids owners and renters with low incomes by offsetting expenses tied to property. While the budget includes indexing the credit for certain claimants, those who are non-disabled and under the age of 62 would be significantly harmed due to new eligibility rules. The WCC supports measures that recognize a preferential option for poor, especially in areas that significantly affect those living with poverty, such as housing, food, and medical costs.

Please contact your legislators to support the positions identified above. Visit the Wisconsin State Legislature website, http://legis.wisconsin.gov/, to find your legislators and their contact information.
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including a review of Catholic social teaching, ethical medical research, poverty, offender recidivism, immigration and refugee policy, servant leadership, human trafficking, water stewardship, racism, and education.

In a breakout session, attorney John David from Catholic Charities in the Diocese of La Crosse discussed recent changes in immigration and refugee policies and examined what the Church can do to accompany families and ensure basic human rights.

David said there is a lot of fear among immigrant families today because of changing policies. “People want to protect themselves and their families,” he said. He pointed out that of the 11 million immigrants currently residing in the United States, about one-third have a U.S. citizen in their families. “We don’t want our families to be torn apart,” he said.

Stewart talked about poverty from a rural perspective, saying “isolation” was the biggest challenged faced. She said those in poverty typically have others in poverty in their social realm so there is little support there and they do not have access to “well-meaning role models” that can help them deal with poverty.

Before the conference came to an end, Archbishop Jerome Listecki of Milwaukee spoke a few words to the attendees and Bishop James Powers of Superior gave the final blessing before attendees went over to the Capitol.