

The End of the 80th

By: Jennifer A. Carr, Associate Director Texas Catholic Conference

The 80th legislative session marked a change in the order of business at the Texas Catholic Conference. It was the first regular session after a changing of the guard of leadership at the conference. The lobby team for this legislative session was expanded from to include: Andy Rivas, Executive Director, Jennifer Carr, Associate Director, and Margaret McGettrick, Director of Education. Even Marsha Solana, Associate Director of Education, and our intern, Maria Frederick got into the action and testified on critical bills. Texas Catholic Conference actively monitored 260 bills and took positions on 115 individual bills (63 Support, 52 Oppose) during the 80th Regular Session of the Texas Legislature. Some of these bills were the identical companion bills filed in the House and Senate. We took positions on 108 different pieces of legislation throughout the session. Bills are enrolled when they pass both the House and Senate, but have not yet been signed by the Governor. Here's how we did:

Texas Catholic Conference Priorities for 80th Legislative Session

Texas Catholic Conference divides our advocacy agenda into five sections: Life Issues, Immigration, Health and Human Services, Education, and Criminal Justice. In this section, we include in our successes bills that we opposed that did not pass.

Life Issues: We are disappointed that there are no major successes in terms of pro-life legislation this session. Efforts to improve reporting and informed consent for abortion were defeated and the clock ran out on the bill that would have substantially improved our state's Advance Directives statute. We remain hopeful that hospitals will implement the ideas in SB 439 during interim. In addition, the budget includes funding for alternatives to abortion and adult stem cells research.

- ★ 0 % of legislation we supported passed (0 of 16)
- ★ 0 % of legislation we opposed passed (0 of 19)

Immigration: The session started with multiple anti-immigrant bills that were able to be defeated by and large. This was a defensive session on the immigration issue at the state level. We look forward to continued efforts by the U.S. Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform which will bring our immigrant brothers and sisters out of the shadows and improve our nation's security.

- ★ 0 % of legislation we supported passed (0 of 7)
- ★ 0 % of legislation we opposed passed (0 of 24)

Health and Human Services: CHIP restoration, foster care system improvements, long-term care insurance improvements, wage and training enhancements for elder care attendants, increase in the personal needs allowance for seniors in nursing care, and legislation aimed at reducing human trafficking in Texas are among the many successful Health and Human Service initiatives of the session. We are pleased to report that legislation (HB 709) passed which will improve education on the benefits of adult stem cells and umbilical cord blood.

- ★ 24% of legislation we supported passed (8 of 27)
- ★ 0% of legislation we opposed passed (0 of 3)

Education: Pre-Kindergarten for children in foster care was added to other education bills, drop-out prevention programs were funded, and child care reimbursement rates were improved. At first review, it

does not appear that initiatives to improve parental choice in education had any major outcomes in this session. In addition, we are disappointed that legislation passed which removes a licensing exemption from many of our Catholic Schools which provide after school care for students.

- ★ 25% of legislation we supported passed (2 of 8)
- ★ 13% of the legislation we opposed passed (1 of 8).

Criminal Justice: Criminal Justice reform was a major highlight of the session with system-wide improvements for treatment alternatives to incarceration. The scandals of the Texas Youth Commission led to needed reforms in the juvenile justice system. In addition, the budget reflects increased funding for treatment alternatives. We remain deeply disappointed in the passage of "Jessica's Law" which for the first time allows the death penalty in Texas when the convicted did not actually kill someone.

- ★ 29 % of legislation we supported passed (2 of 7)
- ★ 50 % of legislation we opposed passed (1 of 2)

It is also helpful to review our outcomes in light of the outcomes of the entire legislature.

- ★ 23% of House Bills filed passed (953 of 4140)
- ★ 25% Senate Bills filed passed (525 of 2058)

It's not just about the numbers...

While these statistics are interesting, they do not capture the full impact of our presence at the Capitol. Our legislative mass at the beginning of the session and our respect life rally day and Catholic Charities rally day were well attended and brought much attention to important issues on our agenda. A clear presence of Catholic school children were seen at the school choice rally day and our immigration message was heard loud and clear at press conferences. We received feedback that our increased activity at the Capitol was a powerful influence in educating members on our positions and the theology behind them. Our newly revised website, www.txcatholic.org, helped our grassroots advocates to track legislation with us and be a part of the legislative process. For the first time in many years we had three Bishops testify before committees, including one who stayed until midnight to do so.

What's Next?

As much as we relish the belief that the session is over and our work is done for 18 months, there is much more to be done. During the interim TCC staff will track interim committees, including testifying at public hearings and work with state agency staff on implementation of legislation that passed. We will work hard to educate the Church on the policy issues and policymakers on the Church. Our website will continue to undergo major improvements. We will research the issues further and build relationships so that we are even more effective in the 81st legislative session.