

Capitol Comments: The 81st Texas Legislative Session In Review

By Jennifer Carr Allmon, Associate Director, Texas Catholic Conference

The 81st regular session of the Texas Legislature has just closed, but they clearly have not finished their business in the capitol for the summer. At the time of this writing, the Governor has already indicated that he will be calling a special session to address some of these issues.

Texas Catholic Conference divides our advocacy work into five areas: Life Issues, Immigration, Education, Health & Human Services and Criminal Justice Reform. While many of the concerns of the Texas Bishops fall into several of these categories, we determine which area to place an issue based on which committees of the Texas Legislature work on these types of bills.

Life Issues: The budget includes an increase of \$3 million in funding for alternatives to abortion programs and continues funding for adult stem cell research. We are disappointed that there are no other successes in terms of pro-life legislation this session. Efforts to allow women seeking abortions to view their ultrasound, to create a Choose Life license plate, to ban funding for embryonic stem cell research, and to improve reporting and informed consent for abortion were all defeated. We are pleased that all of the bills we opposed that would reduce abstinence education, require distribution of emergency contraception, allow for creation of embryos for research and destruction, or impair informed consent for abortion were also defeated.

Immigration: The session started with multiple anti-immigrant bills that were all able to be defeated. While this session was a mostly defensive session on the immigration issue at the state level, we did see the passage of one positive bill that allows an excused absence for children participating in activities to pursue citizenship. 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.

Education: Successes include an expansion of pre-kindergarten and post-secondary programs, and restorations of the licensing exemptions for public and private afterschool care. We are disappointed that there was no success on parental choice in education.

Health & Human Services: Affordable housing initiatives, lifetime respite programs, nutrition initiatives to reduce childhood obesity, funding for health benefits for autism spectrum disorders, and legislation aimed at reducing human trafficking in Texas are among the many successful Health & Human Service initiatives of the session. Unfortunately efforts to institute a state-wide smoking ban and to improve CHIP and Medicaid failed this session.

Criminal Justice Reform: Criminal Justice reform was a major highlight of the session with passage of bills to ban shackling of pregnant inmates during labor and delivery, set standards for the treatment of pregnant inmates, establish a plan for re-entry and re-integration programs for ex-offenders, and create a loan repayment program for certain correctional officers. While we did not succeed in any legislation to ban the death penalty, the legislature passed bills to require training and experience in capital cases for indigent defense attorneys and the creation of the innocence commission and the office of capital writs. We hope these efforts will result in fewer executions in Texas.

For a more detailed analysis of legislative session outcomes visit the Texas Catholic Conference web site at www.TXcatholic.org.