

CATHOLIC CONFERENCE OF OHIO

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Ohio budget benefits Catholic school students, aids Catholic hospitals, mitigates cuts to human service providers; legislators seek further protection for unborn children

Ohio has just enacted a new two-year budget. As with all budgets, especially those enacted during troubled economic times, it is a mixed bag of good news and not so good news.

For many, this budget offers good news. Hungry Ohioans and those who depend on behavioral health programs, adoption assistance, kinship care, early care, pregnancy help, elderly home assistance (PASSPORT), and housing assistance, will see funding maintained or increased for the assistance they need. Students in Catholic schools will benefit from increased funding and new scholarship opportunities. Catholic hospitals avoid major reductions in funding, and maintain their ability to negotiate reasonable contracts with managed care plans. Protections are added for unborn children.

Catholic School Students are Beneficiaries of Budget Negotiations

As legislators worked out their differences on many budgetary areas, they generally agreed on one: the value and cost-effectiveness of Catholic schools. House members and senators added over forty-five million dollars to the proposed budget for line items that impact all Catholic school students. They expanded and improved the existing EdChoice and Cleveland Scholarship programs, and they created the *Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship*. This new voucher, effective for the 2012/2013 school year, will help parents of children with special needs educate them within Catholic schools.

Legislative leaders who were especially instrumental in realizing these educational benefits were:

- Senate President Tom Niehaus (New Richmond) and House Speaker Bill Batchelder (Medina);

- Finance committee chairs, Representative Ron Amstutz (Wooster) and Senator Chris Widener (Springfield);
- Senators Jim Hughes (Columbus), Tom Patton (Strongsville), Peggy Lehner (Kettering), and Bill Seitz (Cincinnati);
- Representatives Randy Gardner (Bowling Green), Lou Blessing (Cincinnati) and John Carey (Wellston).

Senator Keith Faber (Celina) and Kevin Bacon (Columbus) led the advocacy efforts for the *Jon Peterson Scholarship Program*.

Challenges for Human Service Providers

While many human services related programs received reduced funding in this budget, good faith efforts were made to mitigate the impact on persons in need. Catholic Charities agencies were pleased with changes reducing duplicative public accountability measures.

The news was not so good for Catholic nursing homes. Funding for all nursing homes was cut significantly. Catholic not-for-profit nursing homes will find such reductions extremely challenging. While efforts were made to balance nursing home cuts with increased emphasis on home care such as PASSPORT, Catholic nursing homes that have a high number of Medicaid-dependent residents will be hard pressed to absorb such cuts. For example, St. Augustine Manor in inner city Cleveland projects that they will lose \$125,000 a month under this new plan.

The Catholic Conference will remain vigilant in advocating for the needs of the poor and vulnerable. With so many hurting people, Ohio needs to maximize as many public, private and faith-based resources as possible.

Protections for Unborn Children

The state budget bill enacted two provisions to strengthen the current bans on state funding for non-therapeutic abortions. The first bans state funding for abortions being performed in public hospitals. The second prohibits state funding for abortion coverage in insurance plans of local public employees.

Recent action in the Ohio General Assembly seeks further protection for unborn children. On June 28, 2011 the Ohio House passed three important life-affirming bills:

- HB 78, the Viable Infants Protection Act, prohibits abortion after 20 weeks when the child is proved to be viable and can live outside the womb. A similar measure (SB 72) passed the Senate this past April. Representatives Joe Uecker (Loveland) and Tina Roegner (Hudson), along with Senator Peggy Lehner (Kettering) were the lead sponsors.
- HB 125, the Heartbeat bill, prohibits an abortion of an unborn human individual with a detectable fetal heartbeat. Representative Lynn Wachtmann (Napoleon) was the lead sponsor. While this bill is very well intentioned, there remains considerable debate over whether it will be found constitutional. Provisions were added on the House floor in an attempt to mitigate such concerns.

The Catholic Conference of Ohio supports the intent of HB 125, while affirming that prudential disagreements can occur over specific language, political strategies, and constitutional interpretations. The Conference encourages legislators to use their best judgments in enacting legislation that can be implemented to defend and protect unborn life.

- HB 79 prohibits coverage of abortion in state health insurance exchanges established under the federal healthcare reform bill. Representatives Danny Bubp (West Union) and Joe Uecker (Loveland) were the lead sponsors.

It is anticipated that these bills will be debated in the Senate this autumn.

Other Legislative Issues

The Ohio General Assembly will be in recess throughout the summer months. This autumn, the Catholic Conference of Ohio will continue to advocate for helpful immigration reforms and the replacement of Ohio's death penalty with life without parole. Stewardship of the land, enhanced marriage and family life and further protections for all human life will remain priorities. For more information on these and other issues of concern, refer to the Catholic Conference of Ohio's web site: www.ohiocathconf.org

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