

Diocese sees new religious liberty, life laws as positive

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



The 2015 Arkansas legislative session can be summed up with one word: Life. Life issues including abortion, death penalty, safety of children, proper living conditions, fair pay, education and religious liberty were discussed, debated and ultimately passed or failed.

Here are the highlights of major pieces of legislation the Diocese of Little Rock followed closely this year.

ABORTION

Live Action News calls Arkansas the most “advanced and progressive” when it comes to pro-life legislation because the General Assembly passed six pro-life bills. Among them were:

- Webcam Abortion Ban: The Senate (SB53) and House (HB1076) both passed their respective webcam abortion ban bills, creating Act 139. The legislation bans telemedicine abortions, which is a cause Arkansas Right to Life dedicated itself to this year. Webcam abortions involve a doctor prescribing the pills to a woman within 63 days of contraception over an internet-connected video feed, rather than an exam.
- Ban on Use of Taxpayer Funds for Abortion: Act 996 restricts any use of taxpayer funds to go toward abortions unless the mother’s life is in danger. This also includes indirect funding.
- Abortion-Inducing Drugs Safety: Act 577 requires that protocols set forth by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration are followed regarding the recommended dosage levels for abortion drugs.
- Fetal Remains: Act 535 was passed to amend legislation regarding disposal of fetal remains. The previous law stated that fetal remains were merely medical waste. This act now requires that the remains be disposed of in a “dignified manner” and are to be

treated as human tissue, according to the bill.

- Parental involvement: HB1424 repealed an existing law and makes requirements more thorough for minors that seek an abortion. It also created the Parental Involvement Enhancement Act 934, which requires an abortion doctor to have notarized, written consent from a parent or guardian and from the woman if she is younger than 18. It has also increased the waiting period for an abortion from 24 to 48 hours and requires more stringent record-keeping from abortion doctors.

“May we always continue to speak the truth in love and to hold our public servants in prayer that God’s will be done.”

Becky Mullican, diocesan respect life director

In areas of pro-life legislation, Becky Mullican, director of the diocesan Respect Life Office, said the session was a “fruitful season.”

“I am grateful to the men and women who have worked so diligently to draft legislation, find sponsors for the bills, lobby for their passage and to those who have prayed faithfully,” Mullican said. “Let us continue to encourage our legislators and our governor to act in defense of human life in all its stages.”

DEATH PENALTY

- Death penalty and lethal injection standards: Senate Bill 298 to outlaw the death penalty failed. Though this was the first time a bill abolishing the death penalty passed a committee, it did not gain enough votes to appear before the Senate and it was not presented to the House.

Efforts to stop HB1751 also failed. The Administration of Lethal Injection at the Department of Correction is now Act 1096.

“This law allows for secrecy to surround the acquisition of drugs used in execution, it allows for compounding pharmacies not approved by the FDA to be used to supply execution drugs, and it allows for electrocution to be used as an alternative to lethal injection,” Patrick Gallaher, Catholic Charities of Arkansas director, said.

ECONOMICS AND SAFETY

- Justice and child safety: Several House bills, which “would have gone far to advance the cause of justice,” failed, Gallaher said.

“Bills to require that landlords provide a habitable dwelling to renters, to eliminate the criminal eviction statute, to protect against wage theft from employees and to require that pay stubs be provided to employees all failed to advance,” Gallaher added.

Act 376 prevents a Level 4 sex offender from living within 2,000 feet of a church.

Act 1056 requires employees of nonprofit charitable organizations to be mandatory reporters as required under child abuse laws in Arkansas.

"This law will not require a change within the Diocese of Little Rock because all diocesan employees and volunteers are already required to report child abuse under a longstanding diocesan policy," Gallaher said.

EDUCATION

- Scholarships for disabled students: HB1552 became Act 1178, establishing the Succeed Scholarship Program for students with disabilities. The act will allow funding for kids with disabilities in public schools to get a scholarship to a private school of their choice. The private schools must be accredited under Arkansas law as well as being able to provide for the unique needs of the disabled students, meaning that some schools will not qualify. Vernell Bowen, superintendent of Catholic schools, said all the Catholic school principals throughout the state have a copy of the law and will be discussing it soon.

According to the bill, the Arkansas Department of Education will prepare a budget with cost estimates and projections for the program for the 2016-2017 school year.

"I'm not sure what the dollar amount will be," Bowen said. "Also, the child has to be in a public school one year before they can enroll in a private school as well" to qualify for the scholarship.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

- Arkansas Religious Freedom Restoration Act: On April 2, the act became a law mirroring the federal law from 1993.

With the close of the legislative session, Mullican said Catholic faithful throughout the state need to stay diligent in their prayers and push for policy.

"May we always continue to speak the truth in love and to hold our public servants in prayer that God's will be done in this arena and in all things," Mullican said.