

PERSPECTIVE Public Policy

from a Catholic Viewpoint

Welfare Reform, Abstinence Education, and Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy: What is North Dakota Doing?

The federal welfare reform law passed in 1995 contained several provisions concerning out-of-wedlock pregnancy, statutory rape, and related issues. North Dakota is just beginning to respond to these provisions.

One provision that gained much media attention in recent months is the allocation of money to states for abstinence education. North Dakota's allocation amounts to \$126,000. The state Department of Health has opted to participate in the program and intends to distribute the money through the state's regional Childrens' Services Coordinating Committees.

Another provision of the federal welfare reform law requires the state to develop plans and take action to reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and to prevent statutory rape. During the 1997 legislative session, the legislature chose not to incorporate specific proposals addressing these issues in the state welfare reform bill. Instead, the state chose to create a task force charged with developing state plans for addressing out-of-wedlock pregnancy and statutory rape.

The short legislative session did not provide enough time to address these difficult issues. Legislators felt that a task force would be better able to address the

problem. Moreover, many legislators argued that a task force that included church and community representatives would bring to the discussion those persons and entities that have hands-on experience with out-of-wedlock pregnancy and statutory rape.

After the legislative session ended, the state Department of Human Services was charged with the task of assisting Governor Schafer with creating the task force. The legislature, for its part, has appointed Representative Clara Sue Price (R-Minot) and Senator Judy Lee (R-West Fargo) to the task force. The Governor has yet to appoint the remaining members. In the meantime, the Department of Health applied for the federal abstinence education grants.

In the upcoming months, several important developments should occur. First, the Childrens' Services Coordinating Committees should begin accepting applications from interested parties to provide local abstinence programs. Second, the task force should begin meeting. It is important that community and church representatives be involved in both activities.

Welfare Reform and Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy (continued)

Although some restrictions apply, religiously affiliated groups can apply for the abstinence

education grants. In addition, it is important that church and community leaders with experience in addressing out-of-wedlock pregnancy, statutory rape, and abstinence education make their voices heard before the task force.

Statutory rape and sexual relations outside marriage are moral problems. However, that does not give the state license to prevent them by any means. Pro-family and pro-life advocates need to be ever vigilant to ensure that we, as a state, do not embrace morally wrong means to prevent out-of-wedlock pregnancy and statutory rape.

Health Care Committee Goals

At its December 1997 meeting, the North Dakota Catholic Conference Board of Directors approved the following goals for the Health Care Committee:

- Explore and act upon opportunities to improve the health needs of children in North Dakota.
- Promote health access issues to ensure that all persons receive health care.
- Respond to the issues arising concerning the care and treatment of persons at the end of life.
- Encourage and help facilitate collaborative partnerships among Catholic health care facilities, Catholic Family Service, parishes, and schools, supporting the efforts of the bishops of North Dakota to promote the common good, improve access to health care for all, and to maintain the Catholic identity of health providers under their jurisdiction.
- Monitor and respond to proposals to tax charitable not-for-profit entities.

Further information regarding these goals is available from the North Dakota Catholic Conference office.

The North Dakota Catholic Conference Has A New Web Site

The North Dakota Catholic Conference Web Site has a new address. You can find us at:
<http://ndcatholic.org>.

The site contains:

- On-line copies of past newsletters
- Information on Catholic social teaching. E-mail us with questions on social teaching and we will try to answer them!
- The North Dakota Catholic Conference Health Care Page
- On-line copies of legislative testimony, press-releases, and conference statements
- Links to North Dakota Catholic parishes, schools, and other Catholic sites
- Links to other Catholic conferences
- Links to North Dakota government and legislative sites
- Links to other interesting sites

Senator Byron Dorgan Helps Lead Effort Against Oregon Assisted Suicide Law

Although Oregon voters failed to repeal the nation's first law permitting physician-assisted suicide, Oregon doctors have not used the new law. One reason is because the federal Drug Enforcement Agency believes that the prescription of a controlled substance with the intent of assisting in a suicide is a violation of the federal Controlled Substances Act. Senator Byron Dorgan and Missouri Senator John Ashcroft have drafted a letter to Attorney General Janet Reno asking her to support the DEA position. Remember to thank Senator Dorgan.

Bishop Sullivan Brings Family Farm Crisis to the Attention of New York Audience

At a Rosary Rally in New York's Madison Square Garden, Fargo bishop James Sullivan called attention to the difficult times facing North Dakota's farmers and rural communities. The bishop tied the rural crisis to

contraceptive mentality and the culture of death attacked by Pope John Paul II in the encyclical Evangelium Vitae. Here are portions of that address:

“In the area of contraception we use the euphemistic term ‘*family planning*.’ It is really, however, a matter of *family destruction*. Similarly, where farming is concerned, we speak of ‘*farm planning*’ when what we really mean is the *destruction of family farms*. It is the goal of those who plan at high levels to soon have only 50,000 farms in the United States. These *fewer* farms would all be corporate farms. Does this begin to sound familiar? Contraception has reduced the population to such a degree in western Europe that in some countries we have zero growth, and in some cases minus-zero growth. There are many similar risks in a goal of only 50,000 farms. One risk might be termed the risk of rural inbreeding -- with all the attendant risks that come from the lack of healthy diversification that characterizes the family farm.”

“We thought we were finished with ‘Big Brother,’ but apparently we are not. We have ‘Big Brother’ taking charge of our reproductive life and ‘Big Brother’ taking charge of our rural life. Without using the term ‘Big Brother,’ it was this concept that Pope John Paul has been attacking, not only in *Evangelium Vitae*, but in all of his social encyclicals.”

“Take North Dakota as an example of this overlooked sin against life playing out in the concrete. . . . Rural communities, schools and churches have been devastated [by population loss.] They have literally lost generations of leaders. Rural communities, schools and churches find it very difficult to provide services, and the infrastructures necessary for the livelihood of citizens are disappearing.”

“Social justice *requires* that we take into account the principle of *subsidiarity*. I am dismayed when I see people dismissing the family farm as a relic from the romantic past. The family farm, however you want to define it, offers the best environment for family life and for feeding our nation and the world. We have moral obligations towards generations to come as the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us. This is as much true in the rural life context as it is in the other moral contexts . . .”

National Catholic Rural Life Conference Calls for Moratorium on Large-Scale Confinement Operations

On December 18, 1997, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference board of directors called for a moratorium on the expansion and building of new large scale confinement facilities. President of the board of directors, Raymond L. Burke, Bishop of La Crosse, Wisconsin, stated: “Large-scale animal confinement clearly does not serve the public good. It is geared at ever-greater production and profit for a few at a lethal cost to the general population through the destruction of the environment. . . . Furthermore, the economic order which supports it (large-scale confinement operations) makes it impossible for the small or family farmer to carry on a sound form of agriculture which respects nature and produces healthy food and other goods for society.”

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