



Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Legislative Priorities 2007-2008 Legislative Session

This Legislative Priorities list has been compiled by the Council's Public Advocacy Action Team (PAAT), guided by the Council's *Principles for Public Advocacy*. In compiling the list, PAAT considered: (1) traditional issues for Council advocacy; (2) ongoing issues that received advocacy support by the Council and were not resolved in the previous session; (3) issues that have dominated our state and national policy agenda that are in need of significant change in order to truly benefit the common good; and (4) staff time and resources available to carry out the work. While only two issues are named as priorities for the 2007-2008 session, the Council will continue some level of work on issues that it has addressed in the past through coalition work, provision of resources, and distribution of information and alerts as needed.

Top Priority Issues

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches has set the following as its top priority issues for legislative advocacy in the 2007-2008 legislative session. These are areas where the Council will take a major, active, role, either on its own or as a major player within a coalition or similar group.

1. Health/Health Care¹

Our understanding of health comes from our belief that Christ is the great physician, for he “came that we might have life and have it abundantly.”² In a healthy society, the well being of all is a priority.

Based on this understanding, the Council will:

- Support/promote policies and actions that address the concepts of health, healing and wholeness at all levels of government
- Educate the church of the need to fulfill its mission of health and healing, helping people to understand that they are not their own—they belong to God, and therefore must be good stewards of their bodies
- Support legislation and policies for comprehensive health care that is available to ALL persons—regardless of ability to pay. A comprehensive care system should be: 1) universal; 2) continuous; 3) affordable to individuals and families; 4) affordable and sustainable for society; and 5) able to enhance health and well-being by promoting access to high-quality care that is effective, efficient, safe, timely, patient-centered, and equitable³
- Oppose medical malpractice/tort reform that limits the ability of persons to take action or recover damages in the event of medical negligence or gross errors; support medical malpractice/tort reform legislation that enforces accountability of attorneys filing medical malpractice claims to ensure that an investigation has been made to determine that malpractice has occurred so as to prevent costly unwarranted claims that drive up the cost of medical malpractice insurance

¹ The reason for including “health” and “health care” is that we are speaking of two separate but related concepts. Because we affirm the value of every human life we must promote both. Health goes beyond physical health to include healing and wholeness and health care means ensuring that all people have access to those things necessary to assist in maintaining health (as a matter of justice). Efforts concerning health and health care issues will probably involve a variety of groups such as labor, AARP, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and others.

² John 10:10, NRSV.

³ From *Insuring America's Health: Principles and Recommendations*, Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences, January 2004 (www.iom.edu).

- Oppose use of cuts and caps in Medicaid funding that would create hardships for state funding agencies and for Medicaid clients
- Support methods for reducing the cost of prescription drugs

Specifically, the Council is looking most closely at universal, single payer health care options that involve contributions from employers and employees alike and that provide financial savings through the efficiency of having a single payer.

2. Government Reform⁴

We expect the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to ensure that all persons have a voice in government at all levels, and that access is not limited because of situational factors such as inability to make financial contributions or distance, or demographic characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, or religious affiliation. In light of this assertion, the Council will:

- Support campaign finance reform measures that ensure fairness in funding to promote open and competitive elections
- Support lobbyist disclosure legislation that ensures that players with greater resources do not dominate or control government decision making
- Support changes that lead to a more open government system (such as open records, open meetings)
- Support legislative reforms that include, but are not limited to: ensuring that Constitutional requirements concerning making of legislation are observed; putting an end to “walking around money,” known as WAMS; requiring accountability on the part of party leadership; requiring the actual presence of legislators for debate and voting; fair procedures for redistricting that promote competitive elections

Other Issues of Interest

These are issues that are expected to be part of the legislative agenda in the 2007-2008 session, and they are of interest to the Council based on the Council’s *Principles for Public Advocacy*. As second tier issues, the Council will engage in advocacy efforts on an as needed basis, which may include alerts to constituents, signing on to support an issue through a coalition or similar group (with the coalition or other organization carrying the load), and visibility as needed at media events or in the media through op-ed pieces or letters to the editor. Available time and resources and/or anticipation of legislative activity that could result in severe or significant negative impacts to vulnerable populations will dictate actual levels of effort.

1. Environment⁵

We expect that the integrity of God’s good creation will be honored through policies that provide for sustainable practices that protect the environment. Given this expectation, the Council will:

- Support legislation and policies aimed at reducing climate change/global warming, including, but not limited to:

⁴ Pennsylvania, to a significant extent, is a “pay to play” state. The Council’s voice, as well as the voices of persons of faith throughout the Commonwealth, are often lost because neither the Council nor most citizens have the financial resources that would make it possible to gain access and influence with key legislators—particularly the party leadership in the General Assembly. Much of the Council’s future success in its advocacy work, as well as access for people of faith, is dependent on whether or not the way government works can be revamped to “fix” the problems that limit the Council’s access and effectiveness. It should be noted that a broad-based coalition of like-minded groups is being established to do this work, and much of the effort will be managed through the coalition. The Council is also seeking grant funding to support this work and this scenario would involve the hiring of a consultant to carry out day-to-day efforts.

⁵ Groups including the Pennsylvania Interfaith Climate Change Campaign, PennFuture and PennEnvironment will manage most of the work, with the Council playing a strong supporting role.

- Greenhouse gas reductions at the federal and state levels
- Production of cleaner, more efficient vehicles
- Opposition to oil/gas drilling in Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) (federal)
- Support of U.S. endorsement of the Kyoto protocols
- Support reduction in mercury emissions in Pennsylvania
- Support federal and state clean water standards, including the prohibition of mountaintop removal mining
- Support anti-smoking policies that protect persons in all indoor settings

2. Human Needs⁶

We expect that the most vulnerable in our society (children, the poor, working families at the poverty level, etc.) will have access to adequate resources in order to cover the necessities of life and to empower decisions to improve their own circumstances. To that end, the Council will:

- Support policies to ensure that TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) recipients are treated justly under the program's reauthorization in the previous session
- Address hunger issues by, among other things, supporting reauthorization of the federal farm bill
- Support legislation and policies that protect women and children
- Support legislation and policies that protect older citizens
- Support legislation and/or policies that provide for utilities security for the most vulnerable—protection from shut-offs, maintenance of assistance programs
- Support legislation and policies that provide for housing security for the most vulnerable
- Support of adequate funding for mass transit systems that provide transportation to low income persons without cars (and also provide an option to reduce emission of greenhouse gases by providing options other than driving personal vehicles)

3. Public Education

We expect that government should ensure that all people are educated and empowered, to the extent possible, so that they are able to engage in opportunities that ensure secure and stable lives. To that end, the Council will:

- Support general improvement in public education
- Support legislation and policies that provide for more equitable funding among districts
- Support the “costing out” study approved in the previous session to determine the true cost to educate students to state and federal standards, the dissemination of its findings, and the use of its findings in developing a fairer funding structure for public education in Pennsylvania

4. Economic Justice

We expect that government will ensure that all have what they need to create a decent life by establishing policies that do not benefit some persons or groups over others, and believe the whole of society is strengthened as its members participate in and contribute to the common good. Therefore, the Council will:

- Support legislation to raise the minimum wage at the federal level
- Support just tax policies that:
 - Make taxation a shared responsibility of both businesses and individuals

⁶ As in previous years, the Pennsylvania Welfare Coalition will manage much of this work, with the Council playing a strong supporting role. Others involved in human needs efforts include, but are not limited to, other faith-based advocacy organizations, social service agencies, and groups such as labor, AARP, and Physicians for Social Responsibility.

- Exclude income sufficient to keep reporting households above poverty guidelines
- Are progressive
- Continue to support revocation of or revisions to gambling legislation
- Oppose changes to the Social Security program that include privatization

5. Other

- **Criminal Justice.** We believe that there are significant problems in trials and sentencing, and that there is no room for vengeance and retribution in the Commonwealth's criminal justice system. Because we believe every soul is redeemable, we oppose capital punishment in any form because it denies opportunity for rehabilitation and restoration and is often racist and classist in its application. In light of this belief, the Council will:
 - Support legislation for a moratorium on or elimination of the death penalty in Pennsylvania
 - Support legislation prohibiting the death penalty for mentally retarded citizens (supported in previous session)
 - Support the formation of an Innocence Commission to study the Commonwealth's criminal justice system to identify problems—particularly wrongful incarceration—so that solutions may be sought
- **Peacemaking and Global Security.** We believe that there will never be peace on earth as long as there is injustice, and that Biblical witness affirms over and over that those who are committed to peace need to work for justice for all of God's people. To that end, the Council will:
 - Continue to promote the SMART⁷ Security resolution endorsed by the Council's Governing Board on October 26, 2004 and support federal legislation that embodies the SMART concepts⁸
 - Oppose the use of torture as cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment by promoting endorsement the "Torture is a Moral Issue" statement prepared by the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT)—endorsed by the Council's Governing Board in 2006—and supporting policies and legislation that would prohibit the use of torture without exceptions.
- **Responsibility of Christians in the Public Arena.** We believe that it is the responsibility of all Christians "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with (y)our God" (Micah 6:8). To that end, the Council will:
 - Continue to educate the faith community of its responsibility to engage in non-partisan public advocacy efforts⁹
- **Immigration.** We believe that God calls us to welcome the stranger among us, and that "...there shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you" (Exodus 12:49). To that end, the Council will:
 - Continue to support adoption of comprehensive immigration reform legislation that establishes a safe and humane immigration system.
 - Educate the faith community about our existing complex immigration system that has made it nearly impossible for many immigrants to achieve legal status, and encourage the faith community to support comprehensive and compassionate reform.

⁷ Sensible Multilateral American Response to Terrorism

⁸ The Council is working with Physicians for Social Responsibility on this issue. This is follow-up to the Governing Board's endorsement of the SMART Security platform.

⁹ This is an effort to help the Council's constituents (at the judicatory level and in congregations) to understand the critical role they play in the Council's advocacy efforts, and to encourage greater direct participation in advocacy efforts.

Unanticipated Issues

The Council needs to be prepared to engage in advocacy efforts concerning issues that are not on either of the lists above, particularly if the anticipated legislative or regulatory activity could result in severe or significant negative impacts to vulnerable populations. The Council's engagement in such issues will be contingent upon whether or not the effort would be supported by the Council's *Principles for Public Advocacy*.

The Council has policy statements that have been derived from the *Principles* that are designed to help guide decisions concerning unanticipated issues. While the statements contain a fairly comprehensive presentation of positions the Council supports based on the *Principles*, they are not designed to limit the Council's advocacy efforts concerning issues that do not specifically appear in the statements, as long as advocacy efforts would be supported by the *Principles*.