

Conference says Assembly bill another attack

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

A so-called "conscience clause" in the Women's Health and Wellness Act recently passed by the New York state Assembly will do little to protect Catholic institutions from being compelled to violate church teachings against abortion and contraception, according to the New York State Catholic Conference.

The Wellness Act mandates many health insurance benefits the church supports, including mammograms, but it also mandates that employers' group health plans cover contraceptives and abortifacients (abortion-inducing devices). Until recently, the Assembly had refused in its bills to exempt religious employers from offering health plans that violate their teachings.

The state Senate has allowed for such exemptions in its versions of the Wellness Act.

Earlier this year, however, the Senate narrowed the exemption so that it did not cover such agencies as Catholic Charities and most Catholic schools and hospitals. And the Assembly conscience clause is similar to the one in the Senate bill. The conference, which represents the state's bishops, termed the clause "anti-Catholic."

However, both houses have yet to settle their differences on both the conscience clause and other areas covered by the Wellness Act, and action on it appears to be stalled, according to the conference. Essentially, the conference maintains that conscience clauses in both houses' bills empowers the state's government — rather than the state's bishops — to define what is and is not a Catholic institution. The con-

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ference asserts that enactment of the Wellness Act may compel the church to close its schools, hospitals and social-welfare agencies rather than operate them in violation of church teaching.

Richard E. Barnes, executive director of the conference, criticized the Assembly for its latest version of the act.

"Sadly, the Assembly has put the politics of contraception ahead of the First Amendment," he said.

The assembly passed the bill April 8, with the endorsement of pro-choice advocates. At a press conference with Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver the day the bill was passed, Jo Ann Smith, president of the pro-choice group Family Planning Advocates, attacked the church while praising Silver and Assemblywoman Deborah Glick, who sponsored the Wellness Act in her house.

"Speaker Sheldon Silver and Assemblymember Deborah Glick have stood strong against allowing one religious group to dictate state health law through legislative action ...," Smith said.

The Catholic conference wants Gov. George Pataki to veto the Wellness Act. A spokesman for the governor told the *Catholic Courier* that the governor hoped all parties to the current conflict will come together to create a bill acceptable to all sides.



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Helping combat hunger



Sue Norton (left) laughs with volunteer Cherry Love-Duncan at the St. Alphonsus food pantry March 20 in Auburn. Norton has run the pantry with the help of husband, Charlie, for 16 years.

When Sue Norton and her husband, Charles, began volunteering at the St. Alphonsus food pantry in Auburn 16 years ago, they distributed three or four bags of groceries to a few families each month.

Now, 16 years later, Sue Norton said Cayuga County has experienced a drastic increase in the number of people needing food. In a typical month, the St. Alphonsus food pantry distributes groceries to 300 families. And in recent months, that figure has risen to 350 families served, she said.

"Very seldom do I go below 350," Norton added. "I can have my pantry full on a Monday, and by Friday I can barely fill the orders. The need is so great in all of Cayuga County. Each one of us (the county's 14 food pantries and two soup kitchens) is stretched to the limit."

And Cayuga County is not alone. According to food pantries, soup kitchens and food banks across the 12 counties that make up the Diocese of Rochester, more people than ever need help providing food for themselves and their families.

Reasons for hunger

FOODLINK of Rochester is a non-profit food bank that each year supplies \$12 million in food value to 200 organizations and programs in a 10-county area of central and western New York. Six of those counties — Livingston, Monroe, Ontario, Seneca, Wayne and Yates — are part of the Diocese of Rochester.

According to FOODLINK Executive Director Tom Ferraro, economic factors have caused a drastic spike in the number of people relying on food pantries and soup kitchens.

"We've actually seen a huge increase," Ferraro said. "We have seen a one-third increase from 2000 to 2001 in total numbers (of meals served)."

For example, he said the number of meals served in Wayne County is up 47 percent; Ontario County is up 22 percent; and Monroe County is up 45 percent.

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