

## 85th Legislative Session Final Report

After 140 days, the 85th Legislative Session has ended and even though a special session will begin on July 18 several important bills were passed over the last five months.

Religious liberty concerns topped the list of Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission priorities. The CLC helped lead efforts to protect religious conscience rights of faith-based child welfare agencies. HB 3859 protects the rights of religious child welfare agencies to place children in homes consistent with their religious beliefs about the best environment for raising children.

Additionally, the CLC helped stop bills that would have preempted city ordinances that regulate payday and auto title lending and bills to expand gambling in the state, including daily fantasy sports. The CLC has long stood against gambling and payday lending because both lead to financial exploitation of the poor.

The crisis in Texas' foster care system had been the subject of many headlines and discussions in the lead up to the legislative session. The Legislature took many positive steps toward improving the system. Some of the major bills signed by the governor include:

- HB 4 authorizes monthly payments to relative caregivers whose household income is below 300 percent of the federal poverty level. Maintaining family connections should be the first priority wherever possible, as children placed with relatives experience better outcomes (fewer mental/behavioral health issues and placement disruptions).
- SB 11 contains many reforms, but the most important and prominent change is the move to community-based foster care. This change is designed to allow for more community engagement, including with local churches and pastors in hopes of placing more children in forever families.

CLC commissioners set criminal justice reform as another priority. The CLC is a member of the Texas Smart on Crime Coalition, which champions reforms that keep our cities safe, reduce recidivism, and promote effective use of taxpayer dollars. Here are some of our priority bills in the area of criminal justice reform that passed this session.

- HB 3130 establishes a pilot project for educational and vocational training in state jail facilities. This pilot project is designed to fill gaps in programming in state jails and therefore reduce recidivism.
- SB 1584 requires judges to conduct a risk and needs assessment before setting the conditions of community supervision. Studies show community supervision or probation are most effective in rehabilitating when the needs of the offender are personalized to the factors that led to criminal involvement.

- SB 1913 protects poor offenders from excessive fees and fines. Often poor people are imprisoned simply because they lack the resources to pay, this bill makes it easier for judges to give offenders convicted of fine-only offenses community service and other work options. It would require judges to evaluate a person's ability to pay before issuing a warrant for failure to pay.

The CLC supported eight bills designed to protect the the sanctity of life. Here are a two of the pro-life bills that passed this session:

- SB 8 bans partial-birth and dismemberment abortions, in addition to banning the sale of fetal tissue and research on the body parts of aborted babies. It also requires the humane disposition of the bodies of aborted babies.
- HB 2858 was passed as part of HB 2552, an omnibus anti-human trafficking bill. It protects women and girls from forced abortions and requires abortion facilities to post the phone number for the National Human Trafficking hotline in prominent places.

The CLC's legislative priorities are set by a diverse group of 18 Texas Baptists who serve as commissioners. Christian discipleship includes the pursuit of justice through advocacy and public policy, and our priorities reflect a wide array of justice concerns for the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalized. We work in a nonpartisan manner to advance the common good.