

Pro-lifers: N.Y. abortion bill could one day make being pro-life ‘a crime’

ALBANY, N.Y. — Officials at the New York State Catholic Conference are calling the Reproductive Health Act “worse than we thought it would be.”

“It foresees a time in New York where it’s a crime to be pro-life,” said Kathleen Gallagher, director of pro-life activities and the Catholic Action Network for the conference, which is the public policy arm of the state’s Catholic bishops.

The measure, introduced in the Legislature the week of Jan. 7, will expand access to abortion in the state, despite being promoted as simply codifying *Roe v. Wade*. It not only increases access to abortion across the board, including late-term abortions, but also goes beyond *Roe*, which left some limits in place.

The Reproductive Health Act, or RHA, is known as S. 240 in the state Senate and A. 21 in the state Assembly.

“The RHA is a great blow to the pro-life community,” said Renee Morgiewicz, coordinator of Respect Life Ministry and parish services and for the Albany Diocese. “Many people in New York state have successfully held off the legislation for 12 years.”

In the past, a bipartisan Legislature has helped keep the RHA at bay. With regard to life issues, so far, “the Republican Party has helped a lot with” supporting the pro-life agenda, said Morgiewicz. Now, with a Democratic majority in the state Senate, many pro-life issues are anticipated to take a big hit — particularly abortion.

“The fact that we’ve held this off for 12 years gives me great comfort,” Gallagher told *The Evangelist*, newspaper of the Albany Diocese. “It means we’ve saved some human lives, and we saved women from anguish.”

The measure is expected to pass within the first 30 days of the legislative session, as

promised by Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

Dennis Poust, director of communications for the New York State Catholic Conference, said the numbers needed to prevent the bill from passing “just aren’t there.”

“The Assembly is overwhelmingly Democrat, and the governor is the one who has been proposing it. (Senate Democrats) ran on this and were swept into office, so they’re not going to not pass it,” he explained.

The bill refers to abortion as a “fundamental human right,” which is cause for concern, said Gallagher. Because of the strong language, the bill could be used to block religious organizations from advocating for life, or prevent doctors from abstaining from performing abortions on religious or moral grounds.

“‘A fundamental right’ is a right that could supersede everything, even the right of conscience and religious freedom,” said Morgiewicz.

The RHA also repeals the current state requirement that only a licensed physician can perform an abortion and repeals the current law that states third-trimester abortions can only be performed in cases where the mother’s life is in danger.

Physicians and other health care practitioners in neighboring states that still hold strict laws on late-term abortions, such as Pennsylvania, could see this bill as “a green light” to come to the state for work, said Gallagher.

The bill also repeals protections for accidental live births and disallows criminal charges for illegal abortions, such as when a perpetrator seeks to abort their partner’s child through drugs or physical violence.

In early December, a resident of Saratoga County was arrested for punching the stomach of a woman who was 26 weeks pregnant in an attempt to cause a miscarriage. The man was charged with abortion in the second degree, but under the RHA, the attacker would not have been charged with a felony.

The state Catholic conference has updated its website to spotlight the RHA, and to ask visitors, through its Catholic Action Network, to send a message via an email

form on the site to their legislators and the governor urging them not to support the legislation.

While the legislative battle may be over, “we don’t feel that all is lost,” said Poust. “The challenge now becomes changing hearts and minds more than ever.”

Those working in the pro-life movement say their work will focus on educating the public on pro-life issues and providing resources so that fewer women will choose abortion. Many people don’t realize what resources are already available. Catholic Charities, for example, offers a variety of maternity services for women facing an unplanned pregnancy in the Albany Diocese. Other resources include the upcoming diocesan Project Rachel ministry, which provides support and healing to women who have had an abortion, and parish respect life ministries that offer resources and support on a grassroots level.

“Like cigarettes, something harmful can be legal, but if people are properly educated on it, and we are praying for them, they do not have to choose that harmful option,” said Morgiewicz.

Both nationally and statewide, the number of abortions has continued to decline. According to a report issued Nov. 21 by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, approximately 638,169 abortions were performed in 2015, the last year for which statistics are available. That figure is around 2 percent less than the 652,639 reported in 2014, and about one-fourth less than the 852,385 reported in 2006.

“That gives me great hope,” Gallagher said of the dropping rates. More than enacting public policy, the goal of the pro-life movement is “building a culture of life,” she added, noting that one sign of this culture change can be seen in the decline in abortions rates.

“I always used to say, ‘Write to your legislator,’ but the most important thing you can do is talk to your hairdresser, talk to the guy on the local baseball field; that’s what’s going to change hearts and minds,” said Gallagher.

The state Catholic conference recently released a bulletin announcement for use in

parishes across the eight dioceses in the state. Each bulletin insert is customizable so that parishes are able to add local resources for women who may be facing an unplanned pregnancy or who may be struggling after an abortion.

“Rarely is abortion a first choice; it’s usually a last resort,” said Poust. “The church ought to be in a place of helping women and girls to make an informed decision and have the resources they need, whether psychologically, physically, or spiritually, to carry and bring their baby to term.”

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This report was prepared by Emily Benson, a a staff writer at The Evangelist, newspaper of the Diocese of Albany.

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