

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 22, 2009 at 9:56am

Washington March for Life 2009 - with a twist

by Tom Roberts



March for Life participants gather for prayer on the eve of the rally in Washington D.C. (CNS photo)

The annual March for Life is being held today. Following a noon rally on the National Mall, participants will march to the U.S. Supreme Court.

At this year's March for Life, held to protest the Supreme Court's *Roe v Wade* decision legalizing abortion, progressive groups like Catholics United are joining in, aiming to add an element beyond the march's normal focus, of seeking to overturn that decision.

James Salt, director of Catholics United, said the pro-life movement has spent "36 years and at least \$100 million" in opposing the ruling yet have only "incrementally changed the margins. There are still 1.3 million abortions a year in the United States." If the movement were a corporation, he said, it would be difficult to defend such a record. Arguing for a more "results-based" approach, Salt said, "The pro-life movement should be held accountable."

This year, he said, his group and others will hold a briefing on efforts, particularly The Pregnant Women's Support Act, to reduce the number of abortions in America.

Anti-abortion advocates in the past, he said, have been so concentrated on politics and on electing officials on the basis of opposition to Roe v Wade that they gradually lost sight of the lack of results.

'We're going to march to support better respect for life in utero,' said Salt, 'but we think there is also much more that could be done to reduce the number of abortions.'

The March for Life, held each Jan. 22, the anniversary date of the court's decision, and two days after Barack Obama was sworn in as president, will include lobbying members of Congress to support overturning Roe v Wade.

Meanwhile, Democratic Sen. Bob Casey of Pennsylvania held a conference call Jan. 16 to discuss the Pregnant Women Support Act that he plans to reintroduce. A similar bill has been introduced in the House by U.S. Rep. Lincoln Davis (D-Tenn.).

'The reason why I and many others have been deeply concerned about making sure this kind of legislation is introduced is that we are concerned about the American Family and one member of the family that we are not doing nearly enough to support - the pregnant mother,' said Casey.

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The legislation would help expectant mothers during pregnancy by expanding existing programs that provide health and nutrition assistance and by eliminating pregnancy as a disqualifying pre-existing condition for obtaining health insurance. Casey acknowledged that he faces an uphill battle against insurance companies on that element of the bill, but believes it is essential to providing greater support.

Both Casey and Davis spoke of providing assistance for high school and college age pregnant women to stay in school while also bringing their pregnancies to term.

The bill would also promote adoption and increase nutrition aid and health care after a child was born.

A video for the Mach for Life

This video was produced by CatholicVote.org, a self-described "faith based educational program dedicated to informing all Americans about the critical issues in the public policy arena." The organization is a project of the Fidelis Center for Law and Policy, a conservative Catholic organization whose principals include long-time operatives for pro-life Republican candidates.

Casey said the estimated cost of the bill, which would also include a pilot program to set up "Life Support Centers," would be about \$60 million, "which in our federal budget is a very small amount of money."

According to an explanation on Casey's website, the bill, endorsed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops as "a common-sense solution that people on all sides of the political debate can support," will also:

- Provide counseling and shelter to pregnant women in abusive relationships who may be fearful of continuing a pregnancy in a crisis situation;
- Establish a national toll-free number and public awareness campaign to offer women support and knowledge about options and resources available to those facing an unplanned pregnancy;?
- Give women free sonogram examinations by providing grants for the purchase of ultrasound equipment;
- Provide parents with information about genetic disability testing, including support for parents who receive a diagnosis of Down Syndrome;
- Establish nurse home visitation for pregnant and first-time mothers as an eligible benefit under Medicaid and SCHIP (State Children's Health Insurance Program).

Participating in the conference call were Kristin Day, head of Democrats for Life, an anti-abortion group within the Democratic Party, and Alexia Kelley, executive director of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, a group that has endorsed the abortion reduction strategy.

Roberts is NCR Editor-at-Large.

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