2016 Iowa legislative session begins

The Iowa legislative session began on Monday with the usual ceremonies and opening statements by leaders. Rep. Linda Upmeyer (R-Clear Lake) was sworn in as Iowa's first female Speaker of the House. She said that the legislature should pursue policies that increase opportunities, use technology to remove barriers, and make Iowa the best state in the nation to grow a business and raise a family.

Sen. Mike Gronstal (D-Council Bluffs), Senate Majority Leader, said the legislature's focus this year should be bringing more workers and their families into Iowa's middle class.

On Tuesday, Gov. Branstad presented his Condition of the State message. He proposed a state budget of $7.4 billion, an increase of about two percent. Most of the increase goes to Medicaid and K-12 education. The governor also discussed efforts to increase the use of renewable energy in the state, and suggested that racial disparities in the Iowa criminal justice system be addressed.

A relatively small but welcome item in the governor's budget is a $90,000 increase in the state appropriation for textbooks/technology for nonpublic school students.

Medicaid is the government health insurance program for low-income people. As the state transitions to a "managed-care" model from the traditional "fee for service" model, many have expressed concerns about continuity of care and ultimately being required to change medical providers.

Next week the legislature's Health and Human Resources budget subcommittee will hear a report on steps that might be taken to help people who are having problems in the new system. One of the long-time principles of the Catholic Church regarding health care is that a system should "ensure access to quality, readily accessible, affordable, life-giving health care for all." It's important that Medicaid recipients get the care they need and deserve.

As bills start to move in the legislature we'll let you know about our priority items. Click here for the 2016 ICC legislative priorities. A new resource for you this year is the "VoterVoice" app available on Google Play or in the iOS App Store. The app will ask you for your email address and what organization you're interested in (in this case, Iowa Catholic Conference). The app will directly connect you to the action alerts of the Iowa Catholic Conference and give you legislators' contact information.