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Bishops to reorganize communications, hire director

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In an effort to strengthen its communications and public relations efforts, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops approved the hiring of a director of public affairs as efforts begin to reorganize the conference's Communications Department.

The position would work to unify messages on the activities and stances of the USCCB -- not individual dioceses or bishops -- and better carry out church campaigns related to the new evangelization, said Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York, USCCB president.

The Nov. 13 vote on hiring the director of public affairs was 202-25 with four abstentions during the bishops' annual fall general assembly in Baltimore.

Cardinal Dolan told the assembly that whoever fills the position also would likely speak on behalf of the USCCB to the media and provide background on church teaching to public officials and in other venues.

The person appointed to the position would be responsible for developing a "more intentional, focused, comprehensive and unified communications strategy" based on church teaching and focused on promoting the new evangelization, according to a supporting document distributed a day before the vote.

"The strategy," the document said, "should create strong and powerful messages that result in a higher level of understanding and acceptance by Catholics and other audiences."

Auxiliary Bishop Christopher J. Coyne of Indianapolis cautioned that when hiring someone who may speak on behalf of the USCCB, it should be clear that the person only represents the conference. He also urged that the new director of public affairs to be well versed in church teaching, structure and ecclesiology and be able to talk about such topics authoritatively.

He also said that any bishop who might publicly question or refute a response from the public affairs director would undermine the USCCB's communications effort.

In response, Cardinal Dolan said the director's role as spokesperson "would not be his or her full-time major occupation, but it would be part of it." During those times when speaking on behalf of the conference, the person would be restating positions taken by the USCCB as a whole rather than staking out new positions or engaging in debates in the media, he said.

The cardinal reiterated that the effort to hire a director of public affairs is part of a reorganization of the conference's Communications Department as the USCCB strives to unify its communications effort around church teaching and the new evangelization.

In calling for the reorganization, Cardinal Dolan said the communications effort of the USCCB must take advantage of new communications technologies as people adopt new ways of obtaining information.

The cost of hiring a public affairs director and support staff and other services is estimated at $400,000 annually, according to the supporting document.

Bishop Blase J. Cupich of Spokane, Wash., asked about the cost of the effort and whether the $220 million budget adopted during the assembly could afford such an expense. He suggested placing a cap on the communications effort "so we don't find ourselves having sticker shock afterwards."

Bishop Michael J. Bransfield of Wheeling-Charleston W.Va., chairman of the Committee on Budget and Finance, told the assembly that the cost "can be managed."

The plan calls for a reorganization of the Communications Department, which includes a media relations office, customer and client relations, creative services, which is responsible for online and video messages, and Catholic News Service.

Under the reorganization, the public affairs director would work with the bishops' secretary of communications and general secretary in developing the conference's strategic communications "to support the president, conference officers, general secretary and leadership staff of the USCCB," the supporting document said.

Helen Osman currently is the secretary of communications, and Msgr. Ronny Jenkins serves as general secretary.

The hiring of a director of public affairs was proposed during a meeting of the bishops' Administrative Committee in November 2011. The project was taken on by the Executive Committee, which includes Cardinal Dolan, Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., Bishop George V. Murry of Youngstown, Ohio, Bishop Bransfield, and Archbishop Jose H. Gomez of Los Angeles. That committee brought the proposal, based on earlier work of a task force, to the full body of bishops.

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