



Washington State Catholic Conference

The Public Policy Voice of the Bishops of Washington State

Initiative 2124

Initiative 2124 would amend WA Cares, the state's long term care program, to allow all workers to opt out of the payroll tax that funds the program.

Beginning in 2023, WA Cares added a 0.58% tax on the paychecks of Washington workers to pay for long-term care for qualifying applicants. Starting in 2026, those who qualify can access the long-term care benefit, up to a lifetime maximum of \$36,500. The money can be used for caretaking equipment, medication, meals and other expenses for individuals who are older, injured, or disabled. There are a few exemptions from the tax, including people who work in Washington but live out of state, active-duty military, people with non-immigrant work visas and veterans with certain disabilities. People who purchased private long-term care insurance could also opt out until Dec. 2022.

WHAT INITIATIVE PROPONENTS SAY

The initiative allows workers to choose whether to participate in the program. The law has been criticized since its enactment in 2019, in part because too few people who are paying into the program will actually use the full benefit. Proponents argue that while 70% of participants are estimated to need the benefit, that leaves 30% paying in without receiving services. Proponents also argue that the lifetime total is too small to be useful when compared to the potential costs of long-term care. Proponents are also concerned about the sustainability of the program and the high likelihood that a higher tax will be needed in the future.

WHAT INITIATIVE OPPONENTS SAY

The initiative would effectively repeal WA Cares since higher earners who pay more into the program (because it is a percentage of overall pay) are more likely to opt out. As with any insurance, the fewer people in the pool, the higher the costs to those who are left, which in this case would be lower wage earners who are also unlikely to be able to afford private long-term care insurance. Opponents also note that Washington has no income tax and many regressive taxes that harm those with the least income. This program, on the other hand, ensures that everyone pays proportionate to their income.

OUR POSITION: Vote NO on Initiative 2124

I-2124 is a life issue. Lower income individuals who are unable to afford private long-term care insurance are more likely to feel pressure to engage in the cheaper option of assisted suicide rather than leave their families with bills for care.

We pay many taxes for services we may never use. For example, our taxes pay for fire and emergency services most of us hope to never have to utilize. Helping our fellow residents weather the challenges of serious illness or aging is something we do as members of a community who recognize that those with more resources have a responsibility to help ensure those with less are not left to suffer needlessly. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, a person "should regard the external things that he legitimately possesses not only as his own but also as common in the sense that they should be able to benefit not only him but also others." (CCC 2404). We also acknowledge that government should not perform all functions in a society, but it should step in where it is best positioned to protect the dignity and sanctity of life. In the case of long-term care insurance, the market does not provide an option for the poor, so government involvement is needed.

WA Cares may need revising to ensure its sustainability, but elimination of the program in its entirety by gutting its funding is a poor substitute for meaningful policy discussions about the care needs of people with limited means.