

# **\$10 million to BOOST, more updates, as General Assembly begins**

Two weeks into the 2019 Maryland General Assembly, measures supported by the Maryland Catholic Conference are getting attention in Annapolis.

For the fiscal year 2020 budget, Gov. Lawrence Hogan Jr. has increased funding by \$3 million for the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) scholarship program, according to a news release from the Office of the Governor. The total allotment to boost would rise to \$10 million if approved by lawmakers as part of the overall \$46.6 billion state budget.

“The increase in funding would go a long way for these kids,” said Garrett O’Day, deputy director for the Maryland Catholic Conference. “We hope and pray the legislature will act to keep the program funding on their behalf.”

Scholarships through the BOOST program allow students in low-income households to attend a nonpublic school. This increase fulfills Hogan’s commitment to double the program’s funding over a three-year period, according to the news release, bringing total funding to \$10 million.

“BOOST has provided new opportunities to so many kids over the last four years,” O’Day said. “It has also acted to sustain educational continuity for so many others whose families are struggling.

“Hundreds of thousands of low-income students are thriving in their educational environment across the nation because of programs like BOOST, and Maryland is no different.”

The Maryland Catholic Conference pointed out that lawmakers have historically approved less BOOST funding than what the governor proposes. The legislature has until April 1 to pass the fiscal 2020 budget. Funding has increased each year since the state created BOOST in 2016, just not on pace with the governor’s

recommendations.

Therese Hessler, associate director of respect for life for the Maryland Catholic Conference, has been working on a bill with Del. William Wivell, a Republican from District 2A in Washington County. The “Health - Abortion - Reporting Requirements” bill would mandate the reporting of abortions.

The bill was designed not as pro-life or pro-choice legislation, but as a women’s health bill, as policymakers and program planners use report data to evaluate and improve women’s health.

Maryland has not reported abortion data since 2006, and is one of only three states in the nation to not have a mandatory abortion reporting law (the others are California and New Hampshire).

This bill does not promote either side of the abortion debate, according to supporters of the bill, but rather would help to provide accurate data to both, and would ideally decrease unintended pregnancies.

Anne Zmuda Wallerstedt, associate director of social and economic justice for the Maryland Catholic Conference, has been partnering with the Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force on the Anti-Exploitation Act of 2019. The bill would make labor trafficking a felony offense, and would come with a maximum penalty of 25 years imprisonment and/or a \$15,000 fine.