

Abortion reporting, education tax credit top MCC legislative agenda

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Less than three weeks remain in the Maryland General Assembly's 2012 session, and major issues such as repealing the death penalty and creating an education tax credit are still waiting to be moved out of committee and onto a chamber floor for a vote before the session adjourns at midnight April 9.

As the public policy arm of the state's bishops, the Maryland Catholic Conference is working to make sure public policy issues important to the Catholic Church, including those listed below, remain before lawmakers and the public as the session nears its end.

– Abortion Reporting Requirement. According to the Guttmacher Institute, Maryland is one of only four states that do not collect statistics on abortion. The MCC is supporting legislation to change that.

"We're operating in the dark about a surgical procedure affecting the health and safety of women in the state," said Mary Ellen Russell, MCC executive director.

Accurate and updated abortion statistics would be used to inform public policy, and could be used to assess whether or not the state's abortion rate is dropping, and to provide data on teen pregnancy rates.

The MCC was to testify March 20 and 21 in support of SB 427 and HB 967, which would require hospitals or facilities that provide abortions, and physicians who perform abortions, to report the abortions to the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. The legislation would also require the department to submit an annual report to Maryland's governor and General Assembly. The Senate bill was to be heard by the Finance Committee, and the House bill was to be heard by the Health

and Government Relations Committee.

- Education Tax-Credit. The MCC is also supporting legislation to create a state tax credit for business donations up to \$200,000 to organizations providing financial assistance to public and nonpublic students and their families. The measure would partner businesses and schools through student assistance organizations, which would distribute business donations to multiple schools. This bill streamlines the BOAST Tax Credit, which the General Assembly considered in previous sessions.

Catholic schools offer another option for Maryland's students, but 27 of Maryland's Catholic schools have closed in the past five years due to the struggling economy. Strong schools benefit businesses who are seeking a well-educated workforce, communities who want to attract new companies and families, and those communities' quality of life, Russell said.

"The presence of high-quality public and private schools in communities helps those communities and the businesses that are in them thrive," she said.

Nearby states, including New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, provide several hundreds of dollars per student in public funding for non-public school students; Maryland provides \$40 per student, in textbook reimbursement funding, which the MCC is also working to maintain fully in the current budget.

According to the MCC, Maryland's Catholic schools educate more than 51,000 students and save the state more than \$719 million annually in education costs.

The MCC testified March 14 before the House Ways and Means Committee and March 19 before the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee to support the legislation.

- Organ Donation. A bill permitting organ donation from individuals in a persistent vegetative state was withdrawn March 13 by its sponsor, Baltimore County Democrat Del. Dan Morhaim, which MCC considered a success. The measure, HB 449, would have allowed a trustee to make health care decisions regarding organ donation on behalf of a person unable to make decisions for him or herself.

The Catholic Church favors organ donation from consenting individuals, but this

measure would have made it acceptable to treat disabled people as “spare parts for others,” and increase public mistrust for the system, said MCC associate director Nancy Paltell, who testified before the House Health and Government Operations Committee Feb. 21.

- Child Protection. Child protection advocates from the Archdiocese of Baltimore and the MCC testified March 8 before Maryland’s House Judiciary Committee in support of HB 1256, which would require the State Board of Education to develop a program to train school employees in child sexual abuse prevention, identification and reporting.

Alison D’Alessandro, the archdiocesan director of child and youth prevention, told committee members that the archdiocese has trained more than 90,000 clergy, employees, teachers and volunteers in child abuse prevention, and Maryland’s public and non-public schools can do the same.

The bill would require the State Board of Education to form a task force to examine how best to implement sexual abuse training in Maryland’s schools, with a report due to the state legislature no later than Dec. 1, 2013. It is cross-listed with SB 613, which is in the Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee.

- Death Penalty Repeal. Father Ty Hullinger joined other religious leaders March 7 to support Senate Bill 872, which would repeal the death penalty in Maryland.

“The Catholic Church’s long-standing advocacy for death penalty repeal in Maryland reflects our consistent advocacy for laws that respect all human life - even that of the convicted criminal,” Father Hullinger told the committee members.

Pastor of St. Dominic and the Catholic Community of St. Anthony of Padua and Most Precious Blood in Baltimore, Father Hullinger testified on behalf of Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden, a longtime outspoken opponent of capital punishment who was unable to attend in person but submitted written testimony to the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, which held the hearing.

Since 1978 - the year Maryland reinstated the death penalty - five inmates have been executed, the last in 2005, and five sit on death row today. According to Maryland Citizens Against State Execution, nearly two-thirds of Marylanders want to

substitute life without parole for the death penalty, and a 2009 law required certain types of evidence for courts to sentence a convicted person to death.

Death penalty opponents hope that by adding Maryland to the list of 16 states that have banned the death penalty will add pressure to efforts to repeal the penalty in states that do use it, like Texas, which has executed 480 people since 1976, according to the Death Penalty Information Center in Washington, D.C.

The Senate bill is cross-filed with HB 949, which is in the Judiciary Committee.

More information on legislation MCC is following is available at www.mdcathcon.org.