

Issues of concern to Catholics advance in 2019 Maryland General Assembly

ANNAPOLIS - The 2019 session of the Maryland General Assembly ended with last-minute wins on issues that the Maryland Catholic Conference was watching.

A fetal-homicide bill was amended and passed April 8 with about a half-hour remaining in the session. Though significantly modified from its original form, Laura and Reid's Law allows up to an additional 10 years of punishment on top of normal sentencing for a person who commits a crime of violence against a woman that the attacker knows or believes to be pregnant.

"This is really a big step forward in acknowledging that pregnant women are also often the focus and the target of violent crimes, usually perpetrated by an intimate partner," said Jennifer Briemann, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference. "It's a big step forward in combating the domestic abuse that often happens, unfortunately, when women are pregnant."

The law is named for Laura Wallen and her unborn son Reid. She went missing in early September 2017 when she was 14 weeks pregnant.

Prosecutors charged her boyfriend, Tyler Tessier with the murder of Laura, but were not able to charge him for the death of Reid, due to a Maryland fetal homicide statute that allowed such prosecution of homicide or manslaughter only if the woman was 24 weeks pregnant or beyond.

Briemann said supporters hope Laura and Reid's Law "will serve as a deterrent to those violent attacks."

Another last-minute approval came when the House passed the Clean Energy Jobs Act, requiring the state to acquire 50 percent of its energy from renewable sources such as wind or solar by 2030, according to Garrett O'Day, MCC associate director. The bill was a priority for environmental groups, various faith-based coalitions -

including the MCC – and other concerned citizens.

The MCC worked with the Maryland Against Physician Assisted Suicide coalition to point out the flaws in a bill that would have allowed physician-assisted suicide in the state. At this point, only eight states plus the District of Columbia allow it.

Briemann said the bill had passed the House by eight votes, indicating that this was not a typical party-line or unanimous vote, which are more typical in the assembly. She said proponents of the bill were very organized, but the coalition against the bill was able to convince legislators that the bill was “unfixable.”

Compassion and Choices, the principle proponents of physician-assisted suicide, saw any amendments as “excessive,” even one to require mental health screening before a doctor could issue a lethal prescription.

“Of course, the legislators saw those amendments as safeguards,” Briemann said. “Ultimately, the proponents and their pushback against those amendments led to the bill’s demise.”

The MCC was also concerned about a bill that would have enshrined abortion the state Constitution via a question on the 2020. House Speaker Michael Busch, who died April 7, the day before the session ended, had introduced the bill, but withdrew it when Senate President Thomas V. “Mike” Miller said he would not consider a constitutional amendment outside of an election year.

Briemann noted that a groundswell of opposition that surfaced when the bill was proposed – especially from the Latino Catholic community – showed a number of people very strongly against it.

The conference followed several education issues in the session.

“Thanks to the great advocacy on the part of our school leaders, parents, teachers and others the BOOST (Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today) Scholarship Program was passed and will provide approximately \$7.5 million for nonpublic school scholarships for next school year for low-income students, many of whom – probably the majority of whom – attend our Catholic schools,” O’Day said.

The state allocated \$6 million in the budget for the nonpublic student textbook program, which is a cost savings for Catholic schools and Catholic school parents, for textbooks and technology.

The General Assembly also increased the allocation of \$4 million for the Sen. James “Ed” DeGrange Nonpublic Aging Schools Program, which provides infrastructure updates and renovations for schools, especially those with older buildings.

“Additionally, our schools will be blessed to receive an additional \$3.5 million for school safety initiatives through the nonpublic school safety grant program,” O’Day said.

The Legislature also added \$34 million in funding to expand pre-kindergarten for 4-year-olds, with the goal to also eventually expand access to pre-K for 3-year-olds.

He said the state also took a first major step in revamping Maryland school-funding formula and completing a large, substantive educational framework overhaul within the state through the work done by the Kirwan Commission.

“We’re very pleased that they did include in that legislation that the state will be required to provide and expand access to high-quality, full-day pre-kindergarten programs for low-income 3- and 4-year-old families through a system of mixed delivery, which we hope will involve community providers and our Catholic schools,” O’Day said.

The MCC supported a measure to enhance background checks for school employees, referred to as SESAME (Stop School Employee Sexual Abuse, Misconduct and Exploitation). The new law will go into effect Oct. 1 if Gov. Larry Hogan signs it April 18, as expected.

SESAME would allow schools, including Catholic schools, to run additional background checks on potential employees with their former employers “on things that do not rise to the level of a formal investigation or a formal complaint,” Briemann said. “It could be something that doesn’t show up on a criminal background check or a child protective services background check.

“It’s just an extra layer of protection for our children throughout the state, because

this law would apply to public schools, private schools, religious-based schools – all schools will now have to comply with this extra layer of checking in protection of our students and their safety,” she said.

Schools in the Archdiocese of Baltimore already do pre-employment background checks and screening that go beyond requirements for state public schools. “This would add another layer,” Briemann said.

The MCC also advocated on legislation related to immigration, sex trafficking and crime.

At the heart of its educational efforts are the value and the dignity of every human life and of God’s creation, Briemann said – everything from poverty issues, the dignity of work, environmental issues, ensuring that every child has the quality education her or she deserves, and traditional life issues, including abortion and end-of-life issues.

“If an issue comes up and we’re not sure where we are on an issue ... after consulting with the bishops (of Maryland), it comes back to the dignity of life and upholding that dignity of life through political advocacy.

“There is not any issue that we advocate for that falls outside of those boundaries. And it keeps us committed and striving to do better and more every year,” she said.

That means that some of the issues they support are traditionally “red” or Republican issues and some traditionally “blue” or Democrat.

“We’re very purple. ... That allows us to have friends on both sides of the aisle and helps us advocate across the board for all of the issues that we care about,” Briemann said.

Listen below to Jennifer Briemann, Executive Director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, and Garrett O’Day, MCC Deputy Director, discuss the results of Maryland’s recent legislative session on the Catholic Baltimore radio show.

