

Lawmakers to debate issue of illegal immigrants

Maryland legislators will be required to tackle several issues regarding undocumented immigrants this legislative session, from who should qualify for in-state tuition at local colleges to the denial of bail for illegal aliens.

Gov. Martin J. O'Malley also rejected a Motor Vehicle Administration proposal Jan. 15 creating two license tiers, one for people who can produce documents to prove they are legal residents of the U.S. and one for those who cannot.

Instead, Gov. O'Malley backed a bill requiring immigrants to produce documents proving they are in the country legally before they can lawfully drive in the state, which will take effect in 2010 if it's approved by the Maryland General Assembly.

Last November the bishops who lead the three(arch)dioceses in Maryland issued a joint statement saying Catholics should welcome debate on the immigration issue; they also urged the faithful and lawmakers to legislate with compassion.

"The legality of a person's entry into the United States is one issue; our response to him now that he's here is a separate one," said the statement signed by Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien of Baltimore, Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl of Washington and Bishop Michael A. Saltarelli of Wilmington, Del. "We should keep in mind the command of the Lord in the Old Testament: 'You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you.'"

Republican Sen. Andrew Harris sponsored a bill that would forbid the Board of Regents from classifying undocumented immigrants as in-state residents so they can qualify for less expensive tuition. The senator sponsored another bill to prohibit Maryland colleges from charging legally documented state residents higher tuition than illegal aliens.

Under current regulations, the Board of Regents is permitted to classify college applicants as in-state residents, even if they can't provide documentation proving they are in the country legally, said Sen. Harris, a parishioner of St. Joseph,

Cockeysville.

"I don't think you need to give special subsidy to illegal immigrants," Sen. Harris said. "It's just unfair to Marylanders who have lived by the rules."

Eastern Shore Republican Sen. E.J. Pipkin has introduced legislation that would forbid state court commissioners from allowing the pre-trial release of anyone who can not prove they are in the country legally, prohibiting the state from authorizing specified public benefits or services to illegal aliens, and to establish a task force to study how much undocumented immigrants cost Maryland. "There is a sense in Annapolis that Maryland should be a sanctuary state," Sen. Pipkin said. "This is ridiculous, and I say enough is enough."

Traditionally the Maryland Catholic Conference has lobbied state lawmakers to pass compassionate bills affecting illegal immigrants.

The MCC has yet to issue a formal position on the proposed legislation directed at illegal immigrants this session, but Julie M. Varner, associate director of social concerns, said the organization hopes to release a statement before the beginning of February.