

Legislative wrap: Minimum wage, education funds successes in election-year General Assembly

By Maria Wiering

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ANNAPOLIS – The Maryland Catholic Conference counts the boost in minimum wage and full funding of two programs benefiting nonpublic schools among its successes as the General Assembly adjourned April 7.

Legislators passed a bill April 7 raising the state's minimum hourly wage from \$7.25 to \$10.10 incrementally by 2018. The final bill does not require, as earlier drafts did, that the wage be indexed to inflation. It also extended by one year the original proposal's timeline for the full wage increase to take effect.

The MCC, which advocates for public policy on behalf of the state's Catholic bishops, supported a general wage increase, said Chris Ross, MCC associate director for social concerns. Baltimore Auxiliary Bishop Denis J. Madden twice joined state leaders, including Gov. Martin J. O'Malley, at rallies promoting a wage hike.

"This affects working families," Ross said. "That (the wage increase) was a (session) highlight, knowing that those people are going to have further assistance."

The 2015 budget, which passed April 5, retained governor-proposed funding levels for two MCC-backed education programs. A program providing money for nonpublic school textbooks and technology was funded at \$6 million, and a program providing grants for infrastructure renovations and security improvements at aging schools was funded at \$3.5 million.

Last year was the first time in 13 years that the textbook program was funded at the proposed amount, said Garrett O'Day, MCC associate director for education and family life. The aging school program was added to the budget last year.

"We hope it sets a precedent to give much-needed help to our schools," O'Day said of the aging schools grant. "There's a lot of schools that have deferred maintenance projects that they were able to take care of."

The upcoming election colored this session, said Mary Ellen Russell, the MCC executive director. The election primary is June 24, with early voting June 12-19. The MCC does not endorse or oppose candidates, but it will provide educational materials on election-related issues, Russell said.

This session was key for building important relationships and partnerships, Russell

said. Two staff members, O'Day and Andrea Garvey, associate director for respect for life, joined the MCC after last year's session.

"The support of the church is really sought after, both by legislators and advocacy groups," Russell said. "It was a good year to demonstrate how truly bipartisan the church's issues are, yet, at the same time, how consistent the church's commitment is to the dignity of every human person."

Other bills and issues the MCC worked on included:

Maryland Education Tax Credit. The bill, which sought to create a state tax credit for business donations up to \$200,000 to organizations to provide financial assistance to public and nonpublic students and their families, did not receive a committee vote despite support from key legislators. The Maryland Council for American Private Education, which supports the legislation, attracted new members this year, giving the MCC hope for a bolstered effort among advocates in the next session.

Gender identity. A bill to include transgendered people in the state's antidiscrimination statute passed March 28. The MCC opposed the bill, on the grounds that it would legally separate a person's gender identity and the person's biological sex.

"Such a distinction manifests a fundamental violation of our society's basic understanding of the human person, and the complementarity of the sexes bestowed by nature that lies at the foundation of all human society," the MCC argued in its testimony.

The MCC maintained that the Catholic Church opposes harassment or discrimination against any person, but pushed for the bill to align with current exemptions in state employment law for religious institutions, which was granted.

Maryland Earned Sick and Safe Leave Act. The bill sought to require all businesses to allow employees to earn paid sick leave in an effort to promote healthy work environments and allow employees to care for sick family members. The bill did not receive a committee vote in either chamber.

Surrogacy. Although the MCC opposes gestational surrogacy and would prefer a ban, it advocated for strident regulations on a bill codifying surrogacy's practice in Maryland law. Legislators amended the Maryland Collaborative Reproduction Act to address several of the MCC's concerns, including the potential for intended parents to coerce surrogates to abort if they change their mind about the pregnancy. The bill passed the Senate but did not receive a floor vote in the House of Delegates.

Second Chance Act. The legislation sought to shield from disclosure to potential employers certain minimal criminal offenses by a job applicant. The MCC backed the bill, which, Russell said, struck the right balance between ensuring employers could protect children and vulnerable adults from known sexual predators, and protecting

ex-offenders from unjust discrimination while seeking employment. Both chambers passed different versions of the bill. They were not reconciled before the General Assembly adjourned.

Stormwater fees. Early in the session, the MCC advocated for a statewide cap for churches and nonprofits on a stormwater runoff fee passed in 2012.

"It became clear as the session went on that there was no appetite for revisiting that issue this year," Russell said.

She added that there was so much concern raised "both by the church and other entities (about) the excessive fees in Baltimore City ... that there was a lot of pressure put on the city to work in every way possible with churches and nonprofits that would really struggle to pay the fees."

Safety net funding. Funding for the state's most vulnerable was sufficiently maintained in the budget, Ross said. He was heartened to hear Catholics who attended the MCC's annual Lobby Night Feb. 17 highlight the need to fund programs assisting those living in poverty and the working poor, he said.

Juvenile justice. The MCC supported several bills to protect arrested or incarcerated youths, including a measure that would have required youths charged as adults to await trial at a secure youth facility, not an adult jail or solitary confinement, as is the case in all but four Maryland jurisdictions. The bill failed in committee.

Maryland Law Enforcement Trust Act. The MCC supported a bill designed to improve trust between Maryland's immigrant communities and law enforcement by prohibiting local or state law enforcement officials from detaining or arresting anyone to investigate an immigration violation. Proponents argued that immigration enforcement is a federal matter. The bill received an unfavorable report in committees in both chambers and was withdrawn in the House.

The Assembly will convene for the 2015 legislative session Jan. 14.

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