

Local Catholic leaders urge support for Dream Act

In anticipation of a possible referendum to overturn a Maryland law allowing in-state college tuition for undocumented immigrants, an interdiocesan taskforce has been established to educate Catholics on the issue.

Chaired by Washington Bishop Francisco González, the taskforce consists of four members from each of the three dioceses whose territories include Maryland – the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the Archdiocese of Washington and the Diocese of Wilmington, Del.

The in-state tuition bill, known as the “Dream Act,” was approved by the General Assembly and signed into law by Gov. Martin J. O’Malley this spring with the vocal support of Maryland’s Catholic bishops.

The law allows undocumented immigrants to pay in-state tuition at community colleges. To be eligible, students must have attended Maryland high schools for three years and their families must pay state taxes. Students may transfer to a four-year state college at the in-state rate after completing 60 credit hours.

The Maryland State Board of Elections completed the verification and counting of 47,288 accepted signatures June 20 in a referendum petition drive undertaken by the law’s opponents.

Linda H. Lamone, State Board of Elections administrator, noted in a June 22 letter to Washington County Del. Neil Parrott that to complete the referendum petitioning process, an additional 8,448 valid signatures of registered Maryland voters would need to be filed no later than June 30.

The Maryland Catholic Conference, legislative lobbying arm of the state’s Catholic bishops, had urged Maryland Catholics not to sign the petition. Leaders of the Archdiocesan Immigration Coalition asked those who had signed the petition to ask to have their names removed.

As The Catholic Review went to press June 28, it was not clear if petitioners had achieved their goal. Kathy Dempsey, MCC communications director, said her organization was looking beyond the June 30 deadline “in anticipation of the referendum for next year.”

“We want to engage parishioners and Catholics on this issue over the next 16 months,” Dempsey said. “The Interdiocesan Taskforce has been put together to coordinate efforts among the three dioceses to educate Maryland Catholics about the church’s public stance on immigration and how that is consistent with Gospel values and how that relates to the Dream Act.”

The four members of the Archdiocese of Baltimore serving on the taskforce are: Sean Caine, communications director; William McCarthy Jr., executive director of Catholic Charities; Maria T. P. Johnson, director of Hispanic ministries; and Jesuit Father William Rickle, a member of the Archdiocesan Hispanic Council.

In an April 28 column in The Catholic Review, Archbishop O’Brien said students who would benefit from the Dream Act are “making the right choices” in pursuing higher education.

“If we are to face the reality honestly, that these students are likely to remain in our country,” he wrote, “isn’t it in the best interests of all that they be encouraged to contribute positively to our society?”

Father Joseph L. Muth Jr., pastor of St. Matthew in Northwood and a member of the Archdiocesan Immigration Coalition, knows that opponents have questioned the bill’s fairness. Others have suggested that undocumented immigrants should return to their native countries, he said.

“Because of the political oppression or destitution of their own nation, they don’t have a place to go back to,” Father Muth said. “So, that’s probably not going to happen.”

Bills such as the Dream Act offer a compassionate and welcoming alternative, he said.

“It’s probably the most measured bill that the Legislature could have developed,” he

said. "Immigrant students have to go to community college for two years and then they get into a state college if they are academically eligible. They're not allowed to get any scholarship funding, and it also says they aren't taking the place of any Maryland students."

Father Muth noted that leaders of Frederick County parishes recently signed a statement in support of the Dream Act. The MCC has also launched a Facebook page called "Justice for Maryland Immigrants."

"The immigration coalition and others stand on the words of Jesus that say, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me,' " Father Muth said. "We have to figure out what that means."