

Maryland Catholic Conference announces new leadership

ANNAPOLIS – The Maryland Catholic Conference announced March 28 that Jennifer Briemann will succeed Mary Ellen Russell as the conference's new executive director in June.

Russell has served as executive director since 2008; she began working at the conference as associate director for education in 1995.

"It has been a joy to work in a professional capacity that so closely aligns with my personal beliefs and passions, and to work alongside colleagues who share that same dedication," said Russell. "I'm grateful for the unwavering support and leadership that our bishops have devoted to the work of the conference throughout my tenure, and believe we have continued to have a significant impact on improving the welfare of some of Maryland's most vulnerable populations."

Briemann currently serves as the conference's deputy director, and brings more than 15 years in nonprofit and corporate lobbying experience to the new position.

"We are grateful to Mary Ellen for her many years of service and for all she has done to establish the Maryland Catholic Conference as one of the premier advocacy organizations in Annapolis," said Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore, chairman of the conference's Board of Governors.

"Looking forward, it's exciting to contemplate the success I am confident Jennifer will accomplish as the new leader of the conference. Her deep commitment to her faith and the Church, coupled with her extraordinary professional skills, will be a tremendous asset to the work of the conference," the archbishop said.

In addition to the executive director, the conference's staff includes three associate directors who advocate in specific issue areas, a communications director, and two support staff members. During the last decade, Russell has expanded the conference staff to include an associate director for outreach and advocacy, and a coordinator for Latino outreach.

Under Russell's tenure, the conference has been a lead agent in successfully advancing a number of initiatives, including the creation of the Nonpublic Schools Textbook and Technology Loan program and the Aging Schools program, as well as the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) scholarship program for low-income students. The conference was a lead partner in achieving the passage of the Maryland Dream Act, which provides access to higher education for immigrant students; repealing the state's death penalty; and advancing bills to increase the state's minimum wage and provide sick leave to all workers.

The conference has also worked with groups that advocate for people with disabilities and other stakeholders to successfully defeat legislation to legalize physician assisted suicide for the past three years, and to protect conscience protections for religious institutions and healthcare providers who do not wish to participate in practices that violate their religious beliefs.

"One of the greatest challenges and advantages of promoting the church's agenda in the public square is the fact that we can't be pigeon-holed into a partisan approach to issues," Russell said. "As a result, we have alliances with just about every member of the Maryland General Assembly on one issue or another, and we cherish each of those relationships.

"I know from firsthand experience that much of the good work that gets accomplished by the Maryland legislature is thanks to the willingness of both parties to work together for the benefit of the people of Maryland, and it has been a true blessing to be a part of those efforts," the outgoing director said.

Russell will continue to pursue her interest in supporting the efforts of the church to minister to disadvantaged communities, particularly in Baltimore City.