

Maryland Catholic Conference anticipates busy legislative session

ANNAPOLIS – As the General Assembly gathers in Maryland’s Capitol for its session beginning Jan. 10, the **Maryland Catholic Conference** is poised to provide input from the church’s perspective on a host of issues across the political spectrum.

In a political climate so sharply divided on partisan sides, “the church truly does offer a voice that’s nonpartisan,” Mary Ellen Russell, MCC executive director, told a group of reporters and editors from Catholic publications that cover the state, during a briefing Dec. 14.

The conference represents the bishops whose dioceses include Maryland on public policy matters – Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore, Cardinal Donald Wuerl of the Archdiocese of Washington, and Bishop W. Francis Malooly of the Diocese of Wilmington, Del.

Since this is the last year of a four-year term for all 188 members of the General Assembly and Republican Gov. Lawrence Hogan Jr., much of what is discussed in Annapolis will be influenced by the legislators running for office, Russell said.

“Like any lobbyist, I think the most important thing that we do is to educate legislators 1-on-1 on the facts about the issues versus the political rhetoric that they might be reading about in the newspaper,” she said. The conference staff tries to approach each individual legislator in a way that appeals to them about the MCC’s issues, making a connection to the issues the legislator cares about.

Russell said she hopes that violence in Baltimore will be treated in a bipartisan manner. The main difference in approaches is stricter crime enforcement versus systemic solutions to poverty and drugs. People in the state “expect the church to take a prominent role as healer and reconciler,” she said.

Physician-assisted suicide

Physician-assisted suicide remains a priority issue for MCC’s Respect Life

Department.

California, Colorado, Oregon, Vermont, Washington and the District of Columbia have legalized the procedure through legislation. Montana legalized it through a court ruling.

As a largely Democratic state, Maryland will very likely be the target for a bill supporting physician-assisted suicide, after similar bills were defeated for the past three years.

“We’ve been preparing for a fight again this year,” said Jennifer L. Briemann, MCC deputy director and associate director of respect life issues. “The issue isn’t going away.”

In preparation, the MCC has been hosting free pre-legislative information sessions on the topic at parishes throughout the state to educate Catholics on the issue, and to provide guidance on how they can make an impact.

“We have a consistent view of human dignity and the value of human life,” Russell said.

Briemann expects creative legislation to arise from pro-choice supporters. The Respect Life Department will also work with the Social and Economic Justice Department on human trafficking issues.

Immigration

According to Anne Wallerstedt, MCC associate director of social and economic justice, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has made immigration a priority in the new year. However, because immigration issues need to be resolved by Congress at the federal level, Wallerstedt said that “This is a really good time for the church in Maryland to be able to step in and have our voices heard, and really take a stronger role in protecting immigrants at the state-level.”

Although the federal government plans to eliminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which provides amnesty to certain undocumented immigrants, many of whom came to the U.S. as children – typically called

“dreamers” – Wallerstedt noted that there are ways to help immigrants at a state level. “For example, Maryland passed the ‘Dream Act’ (in 2012), which offers in-state tuition to DACA recipients,” she said.

“It’s not just DACA. It’s the TPS Programs, the Temporally Protected Statutes, that are being eliminated federally. We really need people to know that the church is on their side – that we are a place that, even if it’s just for an hour every Sunday, that they can come and feel safe, and access services,” she said.

Education

Garrett J. O’Day, MCC associate director for education, children and families, noted that the conference supports legislation and programs that promote strong families, including Catholic and other nonpublic schools and criminal justice reforms.

In the drive to expand universal access to pre-kindergarten, the legislature may try to reformulate the funding mechanisms for public schools while mandating a diverse delivery system for education services.

“Catholic schools might be expansion sites (for pre-K), especially for 4-year-olds,” O’Day said.

The MCC also continues to support expanded funding for the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students (BOOST) program that provides scholarships for some students who are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program to attend eligible nonpublic schools. Awards are granted based on household income, with the lowest income served first.

O’Day noted that the program saw an increase in applications from 4,500 in the 2016-17 school year to 6,000 applications last year. Much of the increase was from students transferring from public schools. Funding for BOOST was increased to \$6 million for the 2017-18 school year, but if scholarships had been given to everyone who applied and was eligible, the need was \$8.5 million.

Last year, 45 percent of the initial scholarship offers were made to public school students, who received 72 percent of the allocated funds, since public school transfer students get a higher scholarship allowance.

O'Day said the MCC seeks to ensure funding at the same or higher level, and assurance that students who have received a scholarship are guaranteed to receive the same amount each year that they are income-eligible.

The MCC also continues to work on state funding for textbooks and facilities improvements for nonpublic schools, he said.

Lobby Night - Feb. 22

St. John Neumann, 620 Bestgate Road, Annapolis; 3-8 p.m.; free; Maryland Catholic Conference sponsors "Catholics in Annapolis"; shuttles to and from state office buildings to share church's position with legislators; dinner reception in Miller Senate Office Building, 6:30 p.m.; RSVP at www.mdcathcon.org/lobbysnight.

Listen to an interview with Mary Ellen Russell and Jennifer Briemann on Catholic Baltimore:

Contributing to this story were Rico De Silva, Christopher Gunty and Emily Rosenthal.