

Maryland Catholic Conference prepares for 2019 General Assembly

ANNAPOLIS - The Maryland General Assembly will reconvene Jan. 9 for the 2019 session.

Throughout the 90-day session, the Maryland Catholic Conference will advocate for the Archdioceses of Baltimore and Washington and the Diocese of Wilmington, all of which encompass part of the state.

This session will be the first for approximately a third of the General Assembly's membership following the 2018 election. The conference staff has been preparing to educate the new legislative members, and will continue to educate incumbents, to better promote the positions of the Catholic Church.

Life issues - including abortion regulation and legislation; domestic violence; disability rights; and end-of-life issues, such as physician-assisted suicide - remain a priority for the conference.

Therese Hessler, associate director of respect for life, said legislation allowing physician-assisted suicide will likely be presented. In recent years, the proposal had been blocked in committee.

The MCC plans to continue to work with a coalition, Maryland Against Physician Assisted Suicide, comprised of disability advocates, members of the medical community, patient advocates and religious organizations. The coalition considers the bill to be unfixable due to flaws such as leaving the vulnerable - including the elderly and those with intellectual disabilities - open to abuse and coercion.

Other expected issues will include fetal-homicide bills, collaborations with disabilities-rights communities and stopping an amendment to the Maryland Constitution that would protect abortion.

“(A constitutional amendment) would mean that we could not, nor could anyone else, introduce any bills within the General Assembly to create any abortion regulations,” Hessler said.

It would eliminate the possibility of introducing any regulations to the General Assembly that would regulate abortion, including dismemberment abortion bans, pain-capable unborn child protection acts and laws pertaining to minors having abortions.

Maryland is one of the most unregulated states in the United States in regard to abortion, Hessler said.

“Absolutely no abortion regulation laws or bills could be passed within the General Assembly if this becomes a part of our Constitution,” Hessler said. “The only way that that would be possible is if another bill was introduced by way of a legislatively referred amendment to then repeal the (original) amendment.”

“We can see, based on years and years of history, that it has been extremely hard just to put any type of life-affirming and -protecting laws onto our books, so it would be even harder, if this amendment were passed, to undo it.”

Hessler cited the continuous development of science, and how if science continues to point toward life in the womb, it would still be difficult to repeal an amendment.

“Based on church teachings and what we know to be true that life begins at the moment of conception through a natural death, it is very important for us to work to protect that life at the earliest stages,” Hessler said. “Toting something like abortion

as health care, we know that it's not; we know that that's an individual, uniquely created being in God's image and that has a separate DNA structure from its mother and its father."

"Not protecting that as a human right, I think, would be a huge failure from all of us as a society."

The conference also will continue to advocate strongly for education, which saw positive results from the previous year's General Assembly.

The past year "brought a record-level funding of assistance for our parents ... in Catholic and other nonpublic schools," said Garrett O'Day, deputy director.

That funding went to aid the Nonpublic Textbook and Technology Program, the Nonpublic Aging Schools Program, school-safety grants and the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) Program, which provides scholarships allowing students to attend the schools best for them.

O'Day said the main goal is to defend that funding, especially in regard to school safety and the BOOST scholarships.

The 2019 session will likely see recommendations from the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education, commonly known as the Kirwan Commission, which includes a possible expansion of pre-K accessibility for all 4-year-olds, and some 3-year-olds from low-income families.

Due to a lack of infrastructure and building space in public schools, private and Catholic schools - many of which have thriving pre-K programs - would likely be used to provide space for the influx of students.

"(Research finds) when students have access to ... pre-kindergarten at the age of 4,

let alone at the age of 3 ... they are substantially more ready for kindergarten,” O’Day said. “We hope to be a partner with the state in that pre-kindergarten access expansion.”

O’Day said other family and education issues include juvenile justice reform, which he hopes will gain traction in the upcoming session. This includes the issues of juveniles given life without parole and being housed in adult prison or jail facilities.

“It’s always a conference priority ... that we are really a voice for the voiceless,” said Anne Zmuda Wallerstedt, associate director of social and economic justice. “We really want to recognize that every single person has dignity in their lives.”

This session, Zmuda Wallerstedt will focus on that very idea with legislation that will specifically be aimed to aid people living in fear due to an undocumented status; communities disproportionately affected by opioid use and gun violence; victims of human trafficking; and those stuck in poverty.

Jennifer Briemann, executive director, said the Catholic Church in Maryland “will continue to be fully supportive of any efforts by the General Assembly to better safeguard and protect the children of Maryland.”

“The Catholic dioceses in Maryland have had strong child protection practices in place in parishes and schools for decades, making the (Maryland Catholic) Conference a strong ally in efforts seeking to strengthen child protection policies throughout Maryland,” Briemann said. “We continue to share with members of the legislature all that the church in Maryland has been doing for many years and continues to do to protect children, hold abusers accountable and promote healing among victim-survivors.

“We welcome ongoing dialogue with legislators who may have questions about the church’s commitment to child protection in light of the events of the past several

months and are confident that they will agree that the church in Maryland is wholly committed to the welfare and protection of the children entrusted to our care.”