

Maryland lawmakers face controversy as session convenes

ANNAPOLIS – Leaders of the Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC) expect no shortage of controversy in the 90-day session of the Maryland General Assembly that was to kick off Jan. 11.

Proposals to legalize same-sex marriage, end the death penalty and cut approximately \$500 million from the budget were expected to generate passionate debate and dominate much of the session, according to the MCC.

Mary Ellen Russell, executive director of the legislative lobbying arm of the state's Catholic bishops, said the church will stand firm in support of traditional marriage and banning the death penalty – while also working to protect the poor and vulnerable from possible cuts to social safety net programs.

Making sure Maryland doesn't adopt mandated abortion coverage in the implementation of federal health care reform will be another top priority, as will be pushing for a business tax credit in support of nonpublic schools.

MCC leaders plan to educate voters about an upcoming referendum on the Maryland DREAM Act that allows certain undocumented immigrants to receive in-state tuition rates. They also will work to require Maryland to join 46 other states in collecting abortion statistics.

"For the church, we are looking at monumental issues as we walk into the session," Russell said, noting that in the second year of a four-year term, lawmakers are more willing to take up the most controversial issues since they won't face the electorate for another two years.

Marriage

Legalization of same-sex marriage gathered renewed support after Gov. Martin J. O'Malley announced late last year that he will sponsor a bill and make the issue one of his top priorities. Following a lengthy debate on the floor of the House of

Delegates, a bill to legalize same-sex marriage in Maryland died in the last legislative session after it was recommitted to the House Judiciary Committee March 11.

The MCC joined the newly-created Maryland Marriage Alliance to promote traditional marriage and defeat any bills to change the definition of marriage as being between one man and one woman.

“The coalition is committed to a positive message about marriage,” Russell said, “and I think it will provide an effective and positive vehicle for people throughout the state to feel comfortable to speak up in support of marriage without being concerned that their message will be construed as discriminatory.”

Russell said she is “very hopeful” members of the House of Delegates who opposed same-sex marriage last year will maintain their position, and “not cave to the incredible political pressure they’re bound to be under.”

Life

Nancy Paltell, MCC associate director for respect for life, will be working to make sure Maryland opts out of providing subsidized abortions in the federal insurance exchange. Several states have already done so.

“We are trying to prevent any further expansion of government funding of abortion,” she said, noting that Maryland already spends \$3 million a year to fund abortion through Medicaid.

“Abortion is not healthcare,” she said. “It doesn’t save anybody’s life. It doesn’t belong in the healthcare benefit package.”

The MCC tried unsuccessfully last year to require abortion clinics to report statistics, an effort that will be revived this year.

“The state is spending all this money on family planning and trying to reduce the teen-pregnancy rate,” Paltell said. “Let’s measure the effectiveness in the number of abortions.”

Paltell will urge budget committees to eliminate funding for embryonic stem-cell research and support non-embryonic stem-cell research that does not result in the destruction of human life. A bill to fund adult stem-cell research for sickle cell disease will again be promoted by the MCC.

“We are focusing on it because sickle cell disease is traditionally very underfunded,” Paltell said, “and the only cure involves adult stem cells.”

Capital punishment

The MCC has tried to end the death penalty for years and sees this legislative session as one of the best opportunities to make that happen.

“It’s the last two years of having a governor who supports ending the death penalty,” Russell said. “We don’t know for sure whether a candidate in either party would support repealing the death penalty after the election of 2014.”

Ellen Robertson, MCC associate director for education, said an effort to pass a business tax credit in support of nonpublic school students will get a major push in the new legislative session. She will also work to maintain or increase funding for nonreligious textbooks and technology in nonpublic schools. The current allotment is \$4.4 million.

As lawmakers deal with a structural budget deficit, Chris Ross, associate director for social concerns, believes it will be important that the budget is not balanced on the backs of the poor.

“We want to protect the social safety network,” he said.