

# MCC pushes for immigrant driver's licenses, textbook funding

**By Maria Wiering**

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The 2013 Maryland General Assembly session ends midnight April 8, and the Maryland Catholic Conference expects to work up to the legislature's final hours on policy issues ranging from stem-cell research funding transparency to nonpublic school textbook funding.

Among the legislation getting a final push from the MCC is the Maryland Highway Safety Act, which would allow the Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration to issue driver's licenses or identification cards to people without a Social Security number.

"Expanding the eligibility for a driver's license would protect all drivers in the state and make our roads and highways safer," the MCC said in a March 27 "Action Alert" e-mail. "Licenses allow us to procure car insurance, which protects us, our passengers and our fellow drivers."

Mary Ellen Russell, MCC executive director, said the MCC has always supported the bill as a means of securing one of the "basic necessities of life" for undocumented immigrants, and she is hopeful the bill (SB 715/HB 789) will pass this year. It passed the Senate and awaits a vote in the House of Delegates.

Also awaiting vote in the House is the Firearm Safety Act (SB 281), which the Senate passed in February. The bill would tighten Maryland's laws pertaining to firearm ownership, possession and sales, especially in regard to what the bill classifies as an "assault weapon."

The MCC supports the legislation as outlining "reasonable measures" to limiting the loss of life through gun violence, Russell said. If it passes in the House, the bill will go to a conference committee to reconcile House and Senate versions.

A conference committee is currently working on the state's budget (SB 125/HB 100). The MCC is advocating for the proposed funding levels for textbooks in nonpublic schools, a school breakfast program and safety net programs.

As proposed by Gov. Martin J. O'Malley, the budget includes \$5.54 million for nonpublic textbooks and technology, a \$1.14 million increase from last year's funding.

The state's supplemental budget, introduced April 1, includes an additional \$500,000 for textbook funding. It awaits approval through the legislative process.

The MCC is also pushing a bill requiring greater transparency within the program overseeing state funding of stem-cell research (SB 368/HB 779). The bill passed the Senate and was to be heard in a House committee April 2.

Other MCC-supported bills that sought to increase adoption awareness efforts among birth parents (SB 802), ban abortion after the fetus can feel pain (SB 456/HB 1312), and require the state to collect abortion statistics (SB 455/HB 898) have been heard in committee but have not been scheduled for a vote.

The MCC is working to oppose the Maryland Collaborative Reproduction Act (SB 792/HB 1099), which seeks to regulate surrogate births. The bill passed the Senate and was to be heard by a House committee April 2.

In testimony against the bill, Nancy Paltell, MCC associate director for respect life, said the bill “promote(s) practices that exploit women and children” by providing a framework for women to be paid to bear children not biologically related to them.

The MCC was disappointed in the failure of the HOME Act (SB 487/HB 603), which was debated on the Senate floor but sent back to committee. Russell said the MCC has been working for 20 years to pass the legislation, which would prohibit landlords from discriminating against tenants on the basis of their source of income, including a housing voucher.

“We came so close to passing it in the Senate for the first time,” she said, crediting the efforts of Chris Ross, MCC associate director for social concerns, and local pastors.

Russell said the MCC is awaiting the governor’s signature on the bill to repeal the state’s death penalty, which passed in March. O’Malley could sign the bill as early as April 9.

Russell is unaware of any efforts to overturn the law through a public referendum, she said.

“We are going to remain hopeful that the bill will not be petitioned to referendum,” she said.

The MCC is also working with legislators and local officials to mitigate the impact of stormwater fees that nine counties and Baltimore City are planning to assess on property owners for impervious surfaces, such as buildings and parking lots. The fees were required by a state law passed last year to fund stormwater runoff management.

The MCC fears the fees, which must be established by July 1, will be more than nonprofits such as Catholic schools, parishes and charities can afford.

The MCC advocates for public policy on behalf of the state’s bishops.

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