

MCC raises grave concerns about Gov. O'Malley's budget

A day after Gov. Martin J. O'Malley released his Jan. 20 budget in Annapolis, leaders of the Maryland Catholic Conference expressed grave concerns about how it could hurt the poor, children in nonpublic schools and the unborn.

As part of a package of budget cuts designed to close a projected \$2 billion shortfall, the governor slashed funding for the textbook and technology loan program for nonpublic school students – reducing last year's allotment by 33 percent from \$3.6 million to \$2.4 million.

The governor also eliminated 1,000 state jobs, which the MCC worries could hurt access to important state social services by the poor.

The Baltimore Sun reported Jan. 27 that the governor planned to postpone a scheduled round of budget cuts in anticipation of \$3.5 billion in funding from the federal government in the next two years.

At the same time he instituted cuts, the governor increased by \$400,000, to \$18.4 million, funding for stem cell research that includes controversial embryonic stem cell research.

Ellen Robertson, MCC associate director for education and family life, called it “very disappointing” that the governor so steeply reduced funding for textbooks and technology in nonpublic schools.

“The families in nonpublic schools receive very little from the state,” she said, noting that many Catholic schools are struggling with declining enrollment and increased tuition. “We obviously hate to see these kinds of cuts.”

Gov. O'Malley's budget includes a \$68.3 million increase in spending on K-12 public school education. In addition, it includes \$260.3 million for public school construction and renovation and \$774.3 million for public school teacher and librarian retirement pension costs.

Ms. Robertson said she will push the governor to restore the nonpublic school students' modest funding to last year's level through a supplemental budget.

The reduction in state jobs could hurt the poor by eliminating some administrative posts, according to Julie Varner, MCC associate director for social concerns. Ms. Varner is researching which jobs will be affected to ascertain the exact impact of the cuts.

"We're looking at a situation where there is far greater need than the state is currently committed to meeting," she said. "Even with the programs in place, if administrative positions aren't there to make sure people can file applications, Marylanders may not be able to access it."

Ms. Varner was relieved that the budget will keep an expansion of Medicaid in place, contingent on the state receiving an anticipated \$350 million in the federal stimulus package.

"We want to make sure people who are in need of health coverage can access it," she said.

In a written statement when he unveiled the budget, Gov. O'Malley said the budget is lean "by necessity."

"We were forced to cut or level-fund many worthy programs that are important to the future of our state," he said. "But because they are important to our state we worked hard to protect these programs and hold them harmless this year."

The governor's budget decreased overall general fund expenditures by 1.3 percent.