

# MCC tracks wins, losses in Annapolis session

The Maryland Catholic Conference saw some successes on issues it tracked during the 438th Session of the Maryland General Assembly that concluded April 9.

Before the 2018 session began, the MCC, which is the public policy arm of the bishops whose dioceses encompass Maryland, was focusing on expansion of the BOOST scholarship program, immigration and physician-assisted suicide.

The Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) Program 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.

The legislature increased the allocation for the program to \$7.6 million, an increase of more than \$1 million from last year.

“Interestingly, they’ve added a provision to the program that we are very pleased about that will require higher scholarships for students with special needs, giving the BOOST Advisory Board the ability to increase funding for students who need extra resources. We think that’s a real improvement to the program,” said Mary Ellen Russell, MCC executive director.

“We see that as a real enhancement to the program, because we know Catholic schools really try their best to welcome students with special needs. They don’t always have the resources to be able to accommodate a student, and this will be a very good situation for both the student and the school to ensure that they can provide the services that they need,” she said.

Russell praised the Legislature for doubling the amount of funds available for the Nonpublic Aging Schools Program that helps older facilities with much-needed upgrades.

## **School safety**

The assembly also set aside an additional \$3.5 million for school safety measures.

“Obviously the issue of school safety was very important during the session and a big priority for legislators. Thanks to Sen. Ed DeGrange, our champion for education issues, who ensured that nonpublic school students would receive part of that benefit,” Russell said.

Jennifer Briemann, MCC associate director and director of Respect Life Activities for the conference, said one of the most notable “wins” for the conference was the fact that an expected bill on physician-assisted suicide was not even introduced.

She said keeping the bill off the floor was due in large part to the strong coalition that year after year opposes such a law in Maryland.

“I think in an election year, the proponents really did not want to spend the time and the resources that would have been necessary to fight that fight,” Briemann noted.

“That being said, we don’t expect it to die, no pun intended,” she said. “We expect to see it next year. Roughly 25 percent of the General Assembly will be new, so we will be spending this interim after the elections educating the new legislators on that issue.”

Compassion and Choices, one of the leading proponents of assisted-suicide legislation, and other groups are pushing legislation in Delaware and are expected to be back in Maryland for the next session. “They surely are not resting. ... We will be prepared for that,” she said.

The conference supported an ultimately unsuccessful effort to expand the fetal homicide law in the state, on the heels of the murder of a pregnant Howard County teacher. “As far as furthering a culture of life in the state of Maryland and getting protections to women who actually choose to carry their child to term, it’s a vitally important bill,” Briemann said.

## **Immigration reform stalls**

Immigration reforms did not move forward, either, according to Russell.

“In an election year, the Legislature tends to avoid controversial issues. Sadly, immigration often can become a very controversial issue,” she said.

“Of course, there isn’t that much that you can do at the state level; it really is more of a federal issue. We certainly look for opportunities to try to mitigate situations that make life more difficult for immigrants or newcomers to our country,” Russell said.

The MCC backed measures to reduce gun violence, including a bill that passed that bans in the state of Maryland a rapid-fire trigger activator – commonly known as a “bump stock,” a device used by the shooter at a concert in Las Vegas to fire many rounds in a short time.

The conference also backed the successful bill that will remove financial barriers that might otherwise prevent someone from becoming a living organ donor. HB 96 creates a subtraction modification against the state income tax for up to \$7,500 of the qualified expenses incurred by a living organ donor.

The 2018 session is Russell’s last at the helm of the MCC. The bishops of Maryland – Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore, Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington and Bishop W. Francis Malooly of Wilmington, Del. – have selected Briemann to replace Russell as executive director this summer.

Russell was recognized by civic officials in Annapolis on the last day of the session. Gov. Lawrence Hogan Jr. presented her with a citation and the State Senate unanimously approved a resolution acknowledging her for advocating on behalf of the Church in Maryland and for those most in need for more than 23 years.

Russell will continue her advocacy work, as she will take up a position with the Archdiocese of Baltimore working on issues of concern to the church, especially in the city.

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