

Statehouse spotlight: Six issues to watch this session

By Maria Wiering

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ANNAPOLIS – The Maryland Catholic Conference is on board with Gov. Martin J. O'Malley on his top legislative priority: raising the state's minimum wage.

As the state's largest provider of social services, the Catholic Church has a unique vantage on the challenges facing low-earning workers, said Mary Ellen Russell, executive director of the MCC, which advocates for public policy on behalf of the state's bishops.

Russell and the MCC's associate directors spoke with the press Jan. 10, two days after the start of the General Assembly's 2014 session. The following issues are among those they highlighted as legislative priorities in this year's session.

Minimum wage

Maryland sets its minimum wage at the federally mandated level of \$7.25 per hour. Jurisdictions in the state, including Montgomery and Prince George's counties, are phasing in higher minimum wages, and efforts are underway within Congress to raise the wage nationally. The U.S. bishops have long advocated for all workers to have the opportunity to earn a "living wage," which they generally agree is not met by the current minimum.

The MCC is not advocating for a particular new wage, but an increase in general, Russell said.

"We all recognize that a decent paying job is the best way out of poverty," she said. The conference also plans to advocate for paid sick leave for low-wage workers, Russell said.

Education tax credit

In the past decade, the state's nonpublic school enrollment has dropped by 40,000 students with the closing of approximately 150 schools, especially in lower-income parts of Baltimore City. To remedy the decline, the MCC backs a business tax credit, said Garrett O'Day, associate director for education and family life.

The Maryland Education Credit would provide businesses a 60 percent tax credit on donations to mediating nonprofit organizations created to provide financial assistance to schools. Sixty percent of donations would go to nonpublic schools; 40 percent would go to public schools.

The credits are expected to boost nonpublic school enrollments through lower costs, reduce the burden on public schools and stimulate the economy, said Chris Ross,

MCC's associate director for social concerns. Russell called the credit a "win-win issue that we're determined to get across the finish line."

Stormwater fees

Last year's legislative session ended with a flurry of unsuccessful efforts to amend the state's stormwater remediation fees, which took effect July 1 in Maryland's nine largest counties and Baltimore City. Marylanders can expect the issue to take prominence again, Russell said.

As the Catholic Review reported previously, the MCC recognizes the merits of the fee, which complies with federally-mandated efforts to clean the Chesapeake Bay and other waterways. Religious leaders are concerned, however, that the fees in some jurisdictions, especially the city, disproportionately impose on nonprofits, including Catholic schools, churches and cemeteries.

The MCC is seeking a legislative fix for the fees' burden on nonprofits, Russell said, such as a statewide fee cap for nonprofits. It also supports grants and fee-reducing credits for runoff-reduction efforts. The conference is not advocating for fee repeal or a total exemption for nonprofits, Russell said.

Fetal pain

The MCC is again backing the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act (SB 34), which seeks to ban abortions after the fetus can feel pain, said Andrea Garvey, MCC's associate director for respect life. Similar legislation passed last year in Arkansas, North Dakota and Texas, limiting abortions past 20 weeks gestation.

Immigration

The MCC supports the TRUST Act (HB 29), which prohibits law enforcement officers from detaining immigrants solely because of their immigration status. Currently, law enforcement officers in several Maryland counties enforce voluntary detainer requests from U.S. Immigrant and Customs Enforcement, according to a 2013 report from the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland. These detainers can dissuade immigrants from reporting crime and create a culture of distrust between law enforcement and immigrants, Ross said.

"We want to make sure that immigrants feel safe in their communities," he added.

Campaigning

Legislation won't be the only thing on lawmakers' minds. All 188 legislators in the Senate and House of Delegates face re-election this year, with the primary election June 24. Marylanders can expect an element of campaigning this year in the legislation introduced, Russell said.

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