

Supporters say in-state tuition rate for immigrants 'levels the playing field'

Yolanda Vargas Barba's dream of becoming a doctor begins with education. The 18-year-old Bolivian immigrant fears that dream might be out of reach unless Maryland provides in-state tuition rates for high school students regardless of their immigration status.

"It's leveling the playing field," said Vargas, who became a permanent resident of the United States with other family members in October.

The Maryland Senate already approved an in-state tuition bill on a 27-20 vote March 14. The measure is now under consideration in the House of Delegates.

Vargas and other permanent residents would be eligible for the in-state rate, as would children of undocumented immigrants. After receiving an associate's degree, they could transfer to other colleges in Maryland at the in-state rate.

"I would say that not having this opportunity would be very stressful and emotionally unbearable to many families," said Vargas, a senior at St. Paul's School for Girls in Brooklandville. "For me, it's been even more stressful because I see how difficult it has been on my parents. It would definitely help my parents out."

The bill would provide in-state rates to high school graduates who have attended high school for three years in Maryland. They or their parents or guardians would have to provide proof they paid Maryland taxes for three years. Those undocumented immigrants benefiting from the in-state rate would also be required to sign an affidavit stating that they will apply for permanent residency within 30 days of becoming eligible to do so.

"The people who want this bill are paying taxes," Vargas said, "so it's not like they are cheating the government out of money."

The Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC), legislative lobbying arm of the state's Catholic bishops, has been a strong supporter of the controversial measure.

Louis Brown, MCC associate director for social concerns, said it's appropriate for the church to speak out on the issue because the students are "part of the body of Christ."

"They came here through no fault of their own," he said, noting that many children of undocumented workers don't even know they are here illegally until they start looking at colleges.

"They should be provided with all the opportunities of the other children of Maryland," Brown said, "of their classmates, of their friends, of the other children of their community with whom they've grown up with most of their lives."

Passage of the bill would help prevent the creation of an underclass, Brown said.

"This bill is about giving them access to maximize their God-given talent," he said.

Brown pointed out that nine other states have already approved similar legislation with bipartisan support. Asked about concerns raised by bill opponents about the fairness of providing benefits to families that are in the state illegally, Brown said it is unfair to exclude children who have been living and going to school here. The bill gives them the tools to become productive members of society, he said.

The MCC planned to distribute literature about the bill in select parishes in advance of an expected vote in the House of Delegates.