

THE CATHOLIC VOICE

speaking for the vulnerable in Maryland's public square

April 12, 2017

Annapolis, MD

2017 Legislative Session Summary

The 437th legislative session of the Maryland General Assembly ended Monday at midnight after 90 days where more than 2,800 bills were introduced. The legislature approved nearly 950 measures. Governor Larry Hogan, along with Senate President Mike Miller and Speaker of the House Mike Busch, signed 120 bills into law Tuesday during the first signing ceremony in the State House.

The Maryland Catholic Conference advocates the Church's public policy positions for the more than 1 million Catholics living in the state. Many of the major initiatives addressed by the Conference during the 2017 legislative session resulted in a successful outcome. Please find below a brief summary of some of the major issues we addressed this session.

Assisted Suicide

For the third year in a row, the bill to legalize physician assisted suicide was defeated through the efforts of the Maryland Coalition Against Physician Assisted Suicide (www.stopassisted-suicide.md.org), of which the Conference is a member. The bill was withdrawn in the Senate on March 3, prior to a hearing in the Judicial Proceedings Committee when it became apparent the committee would likely vote the bill down.

"Two things were evident this session by the time the bill was withdrawn," said Mary Ellen Russell, the Conference's executive director. "One is that the coalition working in opposition to the bill is growing stronger and becoming much more diverse. The number of groups who have very serious concerns about this bill really are beginning to emerge. Secondly, it became more and more apparent to legislative leadership that there is very strong opposition in the General Assembly. They didn't have the votes and that is why the bill got withdrawn. I don't see that changing."

BOOST Funding

The Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) program, which provides scholarships to students who qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program to attend a nonpublic school, survived aggressive opposition from the teachers' union and other public school allies. Gov. Hogan increased the program's initial funding level of nearly \$5 million to \$7 million, an amount the legislature reduced to \$5.5 million. With additional funds remaining from the first year of the program, nearly \$6 million will be available for scholarships in the coming school year.

"It was great to see the program continued and somewhat expanded," Russell said. "We are very relieved that current students who for the first time in their lives have the opportunity to attend the school of their choice, will be able to continue their scholarships. It is also great that the program will be expanded to new students, with new funds to be given out on a priority basis to students coming from public schools."

Paid Sick Leave

After five years of advocacy, the General Assembly finally passed the Earned Sick and Safe Leave bill, which will allow those working for businesses with 15 or more employees to earn up to 5 days of paid sick leave every year. The bill passed both chambers with veto-proof margins.

Statute of Limitations

The Conference agreed to a compromise measure which will extend the civil statute of limitations for child abuse cases from age 25 to age 38. The bill applies equitably to both public and private institutions, and applies prospectively only, with language in the bill making clear that previously barred claims may not be revived. The bill's sponsor, Delegate C.T. Wilson, and other legislative leaders publicly agreed to put the issue to rest, and that the issue will not be revisited again year after year. The bill passed unanimously in both the Senate and House of Delegates.

Law Enforcement Trust Act

The Conference supported legislation to outline the parameters under which local law enforcement would cooperate with federal immigration officials when apprehending individuals without legal status in the country. An amended version of the bill passed the House, and was further weakened in the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee. The committee did however amend certain provisions of the Trust Act onto another bill supported by the Conference that would better enable immigrants to obtain a "U visa" through the cooperation of local law enforcement when an immigrant is a victim of a crime. The bill passed by JPR failed to reach a final vote on the Senate floor before the end of the legislative session.

"While it was a disappointment that the legislature couldn't come to an agreement on the details of the Trust Act," Russell said, "we will continue to work during the interim trying to ensure at the local level that law enforcement policies protect innocent families."

Holy Week

Holy Week is the last week of Lent. The purpose of Holy Week is to reenact, relive, and participate in the passion of Jesus. Observances began in the earliest days of the Church, when devout people traveled to Jerusalem at Passover to reenact the events of the week leading up to the Resurrection. The time from sundown on Holy Thursday to sundown on Easter Day is also known as the Triduum, which is Latin for "three days."

Yesterday, an important liturgical celebration occurred at cathedrals around the world. The Catholic Review (Archdiocese of Baltimore) and The Catholic Standard (Archdiocese of Washington) have detailed reports on the Chrism Mass:

<http://www.catholicreview.org/article/home/chrism-mass-emphasizes-unity-nods-toward-pastoral-planning>

<http://www.cathstan.org/Content/News/Homepage-Rotating-Articles/Article/During-Chrism-Mass-Cardinal-Wuerl-says-priestly-identity-is-found-in-our-union-with-Christ-/2/409/7740>

Conference Seeking Associate Director for Social & Economic Justice

The Maryland Catholic Conference is seeking an Associate Director for Social and Economic Justice to join a close-knit, dedicated team with a passion for working toward the common good on behalf of the vulnerable in our society. The Associate Director will oversee state-level legislative advocacy efforts addressing public policy issues including poverty, employment, immigration and healthcare.

Minimum requirements: Commitment to the Church and knowledge of Church teaching; Bachelor's degree and at least three to five years' experience in government relations, advocacy organizing, social justice policy or related field; excellent skills in writing, public speaking, and interpersonal relations; proficiency in Microsoft Office. Please send cover letter and resume by April 28 to mgathagan@mdcatholic.org or MCC Associate Director, 10 Francis Street, Annapolis, MD 21401.