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N.J. Catholic Conference applauds passage of in-state tuition bill

by Mary Morrell by Mary Stadnyk by Catholic News Service

Trenton, N.J. — The New Jersey Catholic Conference praised state officials for adopting a law that allows undocumented immigrants to pay in-state tuition at the state's public colleges and universities.

Jim King, director, of the Office of Social Concerns at the conference, the public policy arm of the New Jersey bishops, commended legislators for agreeing on the compromise measure, which Republican Gov. Chris Christie signed Friday.

"The New Jersey Catholic Conference is pleased that the governor's office and Legislature were able to reach a compromise on legislation that will allow certain undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition at public colleges and universities if they meet a set of strict criteria," King said.

"Many of these students came to this country with their parents at a very young age. ... They have grown up here, gone to school here, and now they will be provided the same opportunity to continue their education as their peers," he added.

Known as the DREAM Act, like the federal law, the state law aids undocumented immigrants who have attended at least three years of high school in New Jersey.

A state Senate compromise dropped a provision allowing undocumented students to also be eligible for financial aid if they qualified under income guidelines led Christie to support the bill, the Associated Press reported.

New Jersey joined 15 other states that have passed similar legislation.

The legislation earlier received the support of the New Jersey Catholic bishops.

"For many years, the Catholic Church has spoken out in favor of comprehensive immigration reform," the bishops said in announcing their support for the measure Nov. 21. "We do this because Scripture tells us to welcome the stranger, serve the poor, protect human dignity, respect all life and protect the unity of families. We come with no political agenda. We speak out as spiritual and moral leaders, as shepherds taking care of our flocks.

"In this spirit, we support legislation under consideration that would allow certain undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition at public colleges and universities if they meet a set of strict criteria. Many of these students came to this country with their parents at a very young age," they said.

"For many, this is the only home that they know. To deny this higher educational opportunity to someone on the basis of their parents' immigration status is not right," the bishops added.

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According to the National Immigration Law Center, states with similar laws include California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Utah, and Washington. Of those, California and Rhode Island allow eligible immigrants to apply for state aid for higher education.

[Mary Morrell and Mary Stadnyk are on the staff of *The Monitor*, newspaper of the diocese of Trenton, N.J.]

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