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Catholic Charities head says U.S. health system causes poverty

Jerry Filteau | Feb. 27, 2010 NCR Today

WASHINGTON -- Fr. Larry Snyder, president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA, said the U.S. health care system needs to be fixed because it has become "an underlying cause for the proliferation of poverty in America."

He linked health care reform to the fight against poverty in a statement released Feb. 25 as President Obama and other top government officials held a seven-hour bipartisan summit on health care reform with leading Republicans and Democrats in Congress.

As the legislators and administration officials were meeting on the issue, he said, "it is essential that they recognize the implications of inaction."

The burdens of health care costs are "pushing a new generation of Americans into poverty," he said.

He urged the leaders to "recognize the moral imperative of addressing the need for affordability and accessibility of health care that respects the dignity of life."

"CCUSA believes the call for health care reform represents a national moral crisis, but recognizes that the nation's poor are living this reality as an economic crisis," he said.

The House and Senate each passed massive health care reform bills late last year, but the votes were along partisan lines with the Republican minorities in both chambers unanimously opposing the measures.

The process of trying to negotiate through the differences between the two bills had barely begun when Massachusetts Republican Scott Brown won a special election in January to fill the seat of the late Sen. Ted Kennedy. That broke the filibuster-proof 60-vote majority that the Democrats had held in the Senate and significantly changed the political atmosphere surrounding the health care debate, putting the likelihood of any substantial reform legislation in doubt.

CCUSA, with headquarters in the Washington suburb of Alexandria, Va., represents more than 1,700 Catholic Charities agencies and institutions across the country. In its most recent quarterly "snapshot survey" of those agencies, it said it obtained data pointing to a 53 percent increase in the number of people seeking emergency financial services.

"There are many issues associated with health care reform that divide us as a nation," Snyder said, "but one that can unite us all: Health care reform is essential to the reduction of poverty in America."

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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