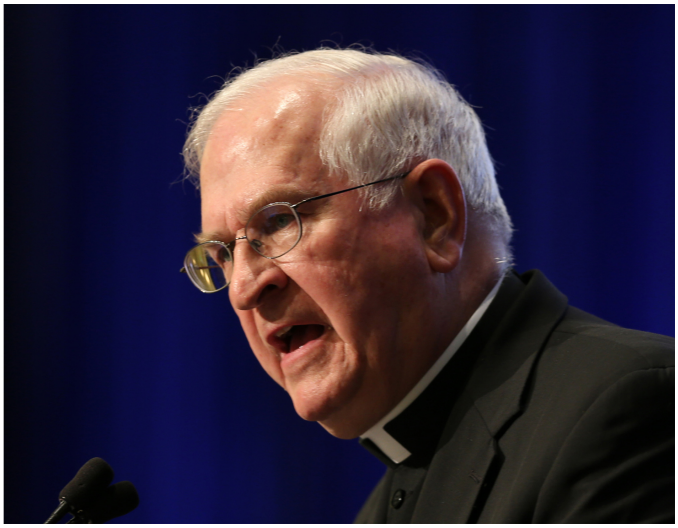
News





Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, and Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., chair of the Committee for Religious Liberty, are pictured in a combination photo. In a March 22 statement it was "deeply disappointing" Congress omitted the Conscience Protection Act from the congressional funding bill for fiscal year 2018. "We call on Congress not to give up until this critical legislation is enacted," they said. (CNS/Greg Shemitz/Bob Roller)

by Catholic News Service

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The chairmen of the U.S. bishops' pro-life and religious freedom committees said it was "deeply disappointing" that Congress omitted the Conscience Protection Act from the congressional funding bill for fiscal year 2018.

"We call on Congress not to give up until this critical legislation is enacted," said a March 22 joint statement from Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, and Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky, chair of the Committee for Religious Liberty.

The church leaders said the legislation is "an extraordinarily modest bill that proposes almost no change to existing conscience protection laws on abortion laws that receive wide public and bipartisan support."

They also said it aims to "provide victims of discrimination with the ability to defend their rights in court to help ensure that no one is forced to participate in abortion."

The statement added that those "inside and outside of Congress who worked to defeat" this legislation "have placed themselves squarely into the category of extremists who insist that all Americans must be forced to participate in the violent act of abortion."

In early March, the church leaders asked U.S. Catholics to contact members of Congress urging them to enact the Conscience Protection Act, stressing that "increasing and fierce attacks on conscience rights regarding abortion cry out for an immediate remedy."

"Nurses and other health care providers and institutions are being forced to choose between participating in abortions or leaving health care altogether," they said in a March 6 statement. They also said "churches and pro-life Americans are being forced to provide coverage for elective abortions -- including late-term abortions -- in their health care plans."

The Weldon Amendment, included in the annual appropriation for the Department of Health and Human Services since 2005, already allows health care providers as well as insurance plans to refuse to provide abortions, pay for them or refer women to abortion clinics.

The Conscience Protection Act is aimed at protecting individual physicians, nurses or other health care professionals who refuse to assist in abortions when asked to do so by their employers. It takes the core policy of Weldon -- protecting those who decline to perform, pay for, refer for, or provide coverage for abortion -- and writes it into permanent law.

The measure was introduced in the House by Rep. Diane Black, R-Tennessee, and Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Nebraska, and in the Senate by Sen. James Lankford, R-Oklahoma. The House passed an omnibus appropriations bill for fiscal year 2018 that includes the language of the Conscience Protection Act but the Senate didn't pass an appropriations bill.

In January, the civil rights office of the federal Department of Health and Human Services put in place new policies to protect conscience rights and religious freedom," a move that won praise from Dolan and Kurtz.

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But they also said a legislative solution was needed.

"Conscience protection should not be subject to political whims, however. Permanent legislative relief is essential," the committee leaders said in a statement in January. They urged action on the Conscience Protection Act to give victims of discrimination "the ability to defend their rights in court."

"No one should be forced to violate their deeply held convictions about the sanctity of human life," they added.