Opinion
Editorial



Rep. Kweisi Mfume, Democrat of Maryland, protests against DOGE, the Department of Government Efficiency, as he and other House Democrats speak out against the Republican budget plan, on the House steps at the Capitol in Washington, Feb. 25, 2025. (AP/J. Scott Applewhite)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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The grounds of the U.S. Capitol became a platform for moral outrage June 24 as more than 60 congregations and organizations of Catholic women religious gathered for "Sisters Speak Out." Their voices echoed a truth that should be obvious: Medicaid is not just a government program; it is a lifeline for millions of Americans whose dignity and survival are now directly threatened. Their unified message resounded as the Senate moved forward to vote as soon as Friday (May 27) on one, big, shameful bill that contains proposals to cut Medicaid funding by as much as $880 billion — a move that cannot be understood simply as a matter of fiscal policy or partisan politics. It is, at its heart, a moral crisis, revealing the values and priorities of those in power and challenging the conscience of the nation.

And it might be worse than we think. Sen. Bernie Sanders, the top Democrat on the Senate's health committee, released a minority staff report on June 25 based on reports from over 750 health care providers across 47 states. The findings are alarming: The proposed cuts could strip health coverage from as many as 16 million Americans and lead to about 50,000 preventable deaths each year. His office called the bill a death sentence for countless low-income and working-class families.

This bill is not only a political and economic scandal; it has become a test for U.S. Catholic bishops. It turns out that the Catholic Church in the United States is not quite united in its response to this legislation. While Catholic women religious are loudly raising their voices in defense of the poor, the sick and older adults, many bishops remain conspicuously timid.

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As Jesuit commentator Fr. Tom Reese has pointed out, U.S. bishops have not mustered a loud, unified, public response to these devastating proposed cuts. Too many appear hesitant to speak boldly on behalf of Medicaid recipients, even as they remain outspoken on hot-button social issues like abortion and gender-affirming care, topics also addressed in this bill. The episcopal silence is telling. It reveals a troubling skew in priorities: When policies threaten the sanctity of life after birth, the

volume is muted and impassive.

Today, as Medicaid faces historic cuts, we are seeing some old fault lines reappear. In 2010, when the Affordable Care Act was on the line, Catholic women religious led the moral charge. NETWORK's Simone Campbell (now a board member of the National Catholic Reporter) and Sr. Carol Keehan publicly supported the bill, campaigning for Obamacare, as it is also known. Many U.S. bishops opposed the ACA over abortion funding and a contraceptive mandate. Campbell's letter on behalf of the bill, signed by thousands of sisters, and Keehan's advocacy were instrumental in helping the bill become law. Their support gave legitimacy to wavering members of Congress who did not want to appear anti-Catholic or, at the very least, to act in opposition to the U.S. bishops. Without the bold efforts of women religious, it is highly unlikely that the Affordable Care Act would have become law.

The House-passed budget would cut Medicaid by at least $715 billion, with some estimates reaching $880 billion, to fund an extension of tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans and large corporations. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office projects that at least 8.6 million people would lose health coverage over the next decade if this bill becomes law. These numbers translate into warnings that children could die. The leader of the National Parents Union calls the budget a national disgrace.

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The impact of these cuts will be felt the hardest by those who are least able to cope. Medicaid mainly helps women, people of color, children, seniors and individuals with disabilities. For many, Medicaid is the only route to access cancer screenings, prenatal care, mental health services and long-term care. Cutting this program will increase inequality, worsen health disparities, and push millions into crisis. It will lead to more sick children, more untreated mental health issues, more families falling into poverty because of medical bills and more preventable deaths.

The injustice of these cuts is made worse because they are being proposed to fund tax breaks for the wealthy. Removing basic nutrition, health care and educational support for political reasons is not just misguided — it is a betrayal of the nation's core values. "What kind of nation targets babies and children to score political points? What kind of leadership looks at a hungry child and says, 'tough luck'?" asked Keri Rodrigues, president of the National Parents Union. The answer is clear: A

nation that balances its budgets on the backs of the poor, the sick and the vulnerable has lost its moral compass.

Even within the Republican Party, dissenting voices are emerging. Some lawmakers, particularly those representing districts with high numbers of Medicaid beneficiaries and rural hospitals, warn that cutting health care to fund tax breaks is "morally wrong and politically suicidal." The way these cuts are being ramrodded only heightens the sense of outrage. In a marathon 26-hour session that ended in the dead of night, House Republicans rejected every Democratic amendment aimed at protecting access to health care for millions of vulnerable Americans.

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Medicaid is not charity; it is justice. Medicaid is the quiet backbone of American health care, supporting more than 70 million people: children, seniors in nursing homes, veterans, those battling cancer, and working families who, despite their hard work, cannot afford private insurance.

This debate reflects a test of our national character. Will the United States uphold the dignity of its most vulnerable citizens, or will it sacrifice them for the benefit of the wealthy and powerful? The answer, as the women religious and countless advocates emphasize, is more than policy — it is a matter of conscience. The moral obligation is clear: Protect Medicaid, save lives and uphold the promise that health care is a human right, not a privilege. Anything less is a national disgrace.