

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 8, 2009 at 12:45pm

White House consults on how to make abortion rarer

by Jerry Filteau



President Obama speaks during his 100-day anniversary news conference April 29 where he announced the formation of a task force to search for social policies that would reduce "the need for abortion." (CNS/Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- To state the obvious, the Obama administration is not about to take any steps to make abortion illegal. But after 35 years of culture wars, the administration is engaged in extensive consultations on what can be done to make abortion rarer in this country.

Participants in the consultations said several sessions were held in May and more were expected in June.

Nancy Wisdo, associate general secretary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, described the May 19 session she attended as a "very polite, very respectful" forum "to bring together people from sort of a cross spectrum who might have something to offer to this effort -- and I can tell you exactly what they called it, because I know the words are important -- "to reduce the need for abortion" -- to find some common ground and reduce the need for abortion."

She said participants were asked to talk about programs their organizations were engaged in to reduce

teen pregnancy or help pregnant women through their pregnancies, and to recommend government programs or policies that might assist in those efforts. "They're at the point, really, of just collecting information, and that was the purpose of our being invited there," she said.

As Wisdo pointed out, the terminology is important: President Barack Obama is unapologetically supportive of continuing legalized abortion and the Democratic Party platform for decades has endorsed that position.

What is different this year is that the president and the party have adopted a stance that continues to oppose the recriminalization of abortion but actively supports social policies that might reduce the number of abortions, or more technically -- if one accepts the Democratic rhetoric -- "the need for abortion."

Leading the White House listening team are Melody C. Barnes, director of Obama's Domestic Policy Council; the Rev. Joshua DuBois, director of the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships; and Tina Tchen, director of the Office of Public Liaison and executive director of the president's Council on Women and Girls.

A White House media spokesman told *NCR* June 1 that while Obama referred to the White House team as a "task force" when he described it at a press conference April 29, it would probably more properly be called an informal working group, consisting of the directors of those three offices and some of their staff.

The president's basic goals, the spokesman said, are "reducing the number of unintended pregnancies and supporting maternal and child health." He said Obama wants recommendations from the team by the end of summer.

Sister of Charity Carol Keehan, president of the Catholic Health Association, also attended the May 19 meeting, which she described as "a listening session on the part of the White House."

"They didn't say what they were going to do; they really wanted to hear from us," she said. "At least it's saying, 'We are serious about this and we're going to try to craft something' in the way of policies.

"My great hope is that we will have, very shortly, comprehensive health care reform and that people won't feel like, 'There's no way I can afford to have this child -- I can't even afford the maternity care,' or feel like, 'I don't have any choice. I've got to have an abortion.' Hopefully we'll be able to help them with that, and hopefully we'll get some support programs, either legislatively or developed in HHS [the Department of Health and Human Services], where we would have some systematic programs that could be accessed by women who were pregnant and needed help," she said.

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With appropriate support programs, she said, "we would be able to say to a young woman, 'Wait. We can get you some job training. We can get you some help with your rent until you can move on and get more financially stable. ... There's a lot that can be done to help you and there are a lot of people that want to help you.' That's really the kind of thing that I'm looking for."

Keehan declined to speculate whether an Obama plan for comprehensive health care reform might include public funding for abortion as well as better pregnancy, maternal and child support systems, as some pro-life opponents of Obama have suggested.

But if that were to happen, "that would be a very serious problem," she said. "I truly do not want to see abortion as a basic [health care] benefit. ... Politically, I'm sure there are a lot of people who would be very uncomfortable if it was in."

"Funding maternity care is a far more significant piece" of any health care reform, she said. "My hope would be that we would not have to have that argument" about abortion funding as part of a reform package that includes pregnancy, maternal and child support.

She said some participants at the May 19 meeting "were concerned that there were enough physicians who were continuing to do abortions, so very honestly it was not a meeting of people who were all of the same perspective -- but it was a very polite, very gracious [meeting]: People were very respectful, and I just had the sense that they [White House officials] wanted to be sure that they heard everybody."

She said that at the May 19 meeting she did not raise the issue of conscience clause protection for medical practitioners who oppose abortion -- a significant concern of the Catholic Health Association that she has addressed in other testimony recently -- because "this was not the forum where that could be effectively addressed."

But she did say she was "quite pleased that at this point we have the secretary of HHS [former Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius], in her hearings in the Senate before she was confirmed, said she favored conscience protection." Noting that Obama also "spoke very clearly about conscience protection" in his recent commencement speech at the University of Notre Dame, she said, "I'm very encouraged by those public statements."

She said the main thrust of her comments at the forum was to urge programs that would help vulnerable women without strong family or other support systems to go through a pregnancy with systems of support that would help them choose birth as an alternative to abortion.

Being pregnant presents many challenges for any woman, she said, "but if you're young and don't have much family structure for support, it's an even bigger challenge. ... We need to reach out to those young women in even more comprehensive ways."

Overall, she called the forum "a very positive experience."

Jon O'Brien, president of Catholics for Choice, said he was not sure policy decisions would emerge from the consultations, but "it would be wonderful" if the Obama administration took "real actions that support people and help reduce the need for abortion."

"If this is a good-faith effort, an honest effort to reduce the need for abortion, pro-choice groups -- and my own group, Catholics for Choice -- are 100 percent behind an administration that would have that aspiration," he said. "However, if it's an ideological dodge, if it's a way for Democrats not to talk about abortion, I think that would be a great sadness and a great pity."

Kristen Day, executive director of Democrats for Life of America, said that at the May 15 session she attended, "I took the opportunity to talk about the Pregnant Women Support Act" currently under consideration in both houses of Congress.

Since the 2004 election her organization has been working to find common ground on reducing abortion, "and we strongly believe this is the common ground, so I took the opportunity to promote the bill and talk about all the good things that are in it to help pregnant women," she said.

‘Ideally, we’d like to see no abortions at all, but that fight’s been going on for how many years now,’ she said. ‘So after the 2004 election we really looked to see -- we may not be successful in making abortion illegal right now, or overturning *Roe v. Wade* -- but what can we do? And we found what we can do is look for common ground and look for ways that people on both sides of this issue can stop fighting about it and work to solve it. That’s when we came up with the ‘95-10 Initiative.’

That initiative, launched in 2005, set a goal of a 95 percent reduction in abortions within 10 years by promoting abstinence, personal responsibility, adoptions, and support for women and families facing unplanned pregnancies.

By shifting the strategy from a fight over abortion’s legality to a campaign to change social conditions that contribute to a high number of abortions, Day said, ‘you can get a much bigger group of people willing to work toward drastically reducing the abortion rate in this country. It’s a tangible goal that we can achieve.’

She said she thinks the series of consultations convened by the White House have been ‘a good forum, because they’re bringing people from both sides of the issue together. ... It gives us an opportunity to talk about what will work.’

‘If you’re looking for common ground, not everyone’s going to be happy, but if you can bring both sides together to agree on something, I think that’s the goal,’ she said.

Cristina Page, author of *How the Pro-Choice Movement Saved America* -- which she described as an effort to build common ground between pro-life and pro-choice advocates -- said she thought the White House meetings were ‘a genuine effort to find common ground.’

Page, who attended a May 15 session, said the discussions were ‘solution-oriented’ and ‘ranged from very broad strokes to very specific policies’ addressing issues such as teen pregnancy, adoption, and support for struggling families.

Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.

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