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Faith groups converge on abortion reduction bill

by Lindsay Perna



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The bill, crafted by Rep. Rosa DeLauro, an abortion-rights supporter from Connecticut and abortion opponent Rep. Tim Ryan of Ohio, includes methods -- namely, contraception -- that some anti-abortion groups traditionally have rallied against.

Conservative evangelical and Catholic groups joined abortion-rights organizations to support the bill, after it was expanded to include health care for pregnant women and new mothers, sexual education programs, a nationwide adoption campaign, as well as federally funded contraception.

"Religious, secular -- it doesn't make any difference," DeLauro said. "There was a sense that we had to move forward. For too long we've allowed principles to divide us on this contentious issue."

The 86-page bill -- the Preventing Unintended Pregnancies, Reducing the Need for Abortion, and

Supporting Pregnant Women Act -- took four years to piece together. Conservative groups initially found it difficult to reconcile pregnancy-prevention programs and medical support for women with grants that will expand sexual education to include awareness about abortion and contraception.

But over time, supporters grew from one religious group to more than 40 faith-based supporters. Rachel Laser of the centrist Washington think tank Third Way, who helped negotiate the bill, insisted "that no one compromise their core values."

"We broke bread with evangelical church leaders whom we had never spoken with before, we huddled with pro-choice women and men, secular and religious," Laser said. "We communed with Catholic leaders and leaders of other denominations."

The result is a bill that empowers young people with education and resources while instilling a set of religious and moral values in them, said the Rev. Carlton Veazey, president of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

"We can find something to share and that's the whole crux of the matter," he said.

Though the bill has some good provisions, Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said he cannot support a bill that pushes emergency contraception. "That's a deal breaker for us," he said.

Catholics also contend that the bill bolsters the abortion industry instead of upholding its stated purpose to reduce abortions.

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Richard M. Doerflinger, a top bioethicist for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said clergy who are "being paraded out for this farce" are unaware that abstinence education would turn into programs that promote the morning-after pill and methods that conservatives consider akin to abortion.

"They saw the words 'reduce abortions' and 'reduce teen pregnancies' and jumped on the bandwagon," Doerflinger said. "Its focus on contraception is almost obsessive."

The contraception issue has been problematic for Catholics because while the church opposes abortion, it also prohibits all forms of artificial birth control. A competing bill, the Pregnant Women's Support Act, also aims to reduce abortions but without expanding contraception.

Kristen Day, executive director of Democrats for Life of America, said her group supports the alternative bill because it has greater Republican support, in part because it does not include abortion.

"When you put the potential of abortion funding in the bill, then it's a partisan issue," she said of the Ryan-DeLauro bill. "It becomes a wedge issue; we're trying to take the wedge out."

Yet Jon O'Brien, president of the abortion-rights group Catholics for Choice, said both Catholics and other faith communities can support the Ryan-DeLauro bill because it is more comprehensive -- in addition to reflecting Catholics' "preferential option for the poor."

"It's less of getting common ground and far more a common-sense approach to try to do something," he said. "Getting behind something like this means that we can help people, but it doesn't mean the abortion

question goes away."

While O'Brien doubts the Ryan-DeLauro bill will get much support from the 350-odd members of the Catholic bishops conference, he thinks it could get widespread support from the nation's 67 million rank-and-file Catholics.

"This bill is one that is a very Catholic bill," he said, "despite the bishops."

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