

Cardinal George praises health reform vote

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WASHINGTON

Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, president of the U.S. bishops, praised the House for approving a reform bill that provides "adequate and affordable health care to all" and "voting overwhelmingly" for a prohibition on using federal money to pay for most abortions.

An amendment to ban abortion funding sponsored by Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., and other House members passed 240-194, and led to passage of the Affordable Health Care for America Act in a 220-215 vote.

In a statement issued late Nov. 9, the cardinal lauded the Nov. 7 vote and urged the Senate to follow the House's example.

The House "honored President (Barack) Obama's commitment to the Congress and the nation that health care reform would not become a vehicle for expanding abortion funding or mandates," he said.

The Senate is expected to take up its version of health care reform later this month. The House and Senate bills differ significantly, so any version the Senate passes will have to be reconciled with the other, and each body will vote again on the final legislation. The Senate bill does not include language on abortion similar to the Stupak amendment.

Cardinal George said the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops "will remain vigilant ... to assure that these essential provisions are maintained and included in the final legislation."

The House bill would provide a combination of subsidies, employer mandates, insurance company requirements and incentives and an option to buy into federally run health care, all intended to provide coverage for millions of uninsured Americans. It also aims to bring spiraling costs under control and eliminate some of the frustrations of the current health system, such as exclusions from insurance coverage for pre-existing medical conditions.

Cardinal George said the Catholic Church is concerned about how health reform "affects the poor and vulnerable, and those at the beginning and end of life."

"We will continue to insist that health care reform legislation must protect conscience rights," he said. "We support measures to make health care more affordable for low-income people and the uninsured. We remain deeply concerned that immigrants be treated fairly and not lose the health care coverage that they now have."

"In the national discussion on how to provide the best kind of health care, we bishops do not claim or present ourselves as experts on health care policy," he said. "We are not prepared to assess every provision of legislation as complex as this proposal.

"However, health care legislation, with all its political, technical and economic aspects, is about human beings

and hence has serious moral dimensions," he added.

Cardinal George had been among those in contact with members of Congress as they moved toward a vote on the legislation; for instance, he urged Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., Nov. 6 to allow Stupak's amendment to come to the floor for a vote.

In a series of letters leading up to the vote, the bishops who head the USCCB's committees on Pro-Life Activities, Migration, and Domestic Justice and Human Development had pressed House members to back Stupak's amendment, and expressed their pleasure that it was going to be brought to a vote.

In a letter issued the day of the Nov. 7 House vote, Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., domestic policy chairman, and Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, pro-life chairman, said the amendment would add "crucial provisions that maintain the current protections against abortion funding and mandates."

"Specifically, it will achieve our objective of applying the provisions of the Hyde amendment to the public health plan and on the affordability credits in the exchanges called for in the legislation," they wrote.

They called the amendment "a major step forward," and expressed appreciation for Stupak and six other members of the Democratic pro-life caucus who they said played essential roles in moving the amendment forward -- Reps. Bart Ellsworth and Joe Donnelly of Indiana, Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, James Oberstar of Minnesota, and Mike Doyle and Kathy Dahlkemper of Pennsylvania.

"We also welcome the wise decision of the House leadership to take this important procedural step which we believe will help pass much needed health care reform," they said.

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