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Senate rejects health reform abortion restriction

by Jerry Filteau



Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada talks to reporters about health care legislation at the U.S. Capitol in Washington Dec. 8. (CNS/Jonathan Ernst, Reuters)

WASHINGTON ? In a 54-45 vote the U.S. Senate Dec. 8 rejected a health care reform amendment that would have clearly ruled out abortion coverage in any publicly funded or subsidized health insurance plan.

Late in the day Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid, D-Nev., announced that a team of 10 Senate Democrats had put together a tentative agreement that might break the chamber's deadlock over including a government-run insurance plan as part of the reform.

Lynchpins of the new deal would be:

- Dropping the public option -- the government-run insurance plan -- and replacing it with several national insurance policies, run by private companies but negotiated with the government's Office of Personnel Management, which currently negotiates the rates and terms of policies covering federal employees.

- Much stricter regulation of insurance companies, including a requirement that 90 cents of every insurance dollar collected be spent on medical services.
- Allowing people as young as 55 to buy into Medicare, the government insurance program for those 65 and older.

The new plan was cobbled together over the previous six days by a team of five liberal and five moderate Democrats. Reid had appointed them to work out differences between party liberals, who insisted on the public option, and moderates on either side of the aisle, who include several Senators opposed to any public option program.

The abortion amendment, introduced Dec. 7 by Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., and co-sponsored by Senators Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and Robert Casey, D-Pa. and six other senators, sought to bring the Senate bill in sync with the already-approved House version of the legislation.

It would have explicitly barred use of public funds for any insurance plan that included elective abortion coverage, although it would allow unsubsidized private plans to offer such coverage and would let people on government-subsidized insurance plans purchase supplementary abortion coverage with their own money.

Opponents of the amendment said the bill already had sufficient barriers to use of public funds for elective abortions. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops disagreed and urged the Senate to adopt the Nelson-Hatch-Casey amendment.

Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, bishops' conference president, said the bishops "deplore" the vote against the amendment but "we remain hopeful that the protections passed overwhelmingly by the House will be incorporated into needed reform legislation."

"Failure to exclude abortion funding will turn allies into adversaries and require us and others to oppose this bill because it abandons both principle and precedent" on barring federal funding for elective abortions, he said.

The authors of the new plan to exclude a public option hoped that in addition to appeasing centrist Democrats, the proposal might gain critical support from Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, I-Conn., or Sen. Olympia J. Snowe, R-Maine.

The Republicans in the Senate have consistently maintained ranks in opposing the Democrats' health care reform with the exception of Snowe, who voted for it in the Senate Finance Committee.

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Lieberman has said he will vote against any bill that includes a public option.

The new proposal does not entirely eliminate the possibility of a public option: It could be triggered if the proposed national insurance plans fail to meet targets of affordable insurance for a sufficient number of people.

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

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