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Bishops push Senate on health care reform

Jerry Filteau | Dec. 16, 2009

Demonstrators protest against the health care bill outside the U.S. Capitol in Washington Dec. 15. (CNS photo/Kevin Lamarque, Reuters)

WASHINGTON ? As the U.S. Senate began to enter apparent closing stages of developing its version of national health care reform, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops made new pleas to give legal immigrants more access to health care and to continue barring any federal funding of elective abortions.

In two separate letters to senators Dec. 14, top officials from the bishops' conference urged:

- Senate adoption of House legislation, introduced there by Rep. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., that would allow states to eliminate the current five-year residency requirement before legal immigrants are eligible to apply for Medicaid benefits.
- Reconsideration of provisions recently rejected by the Senate that would prohibit any use of taxpayer money to fund elective abortions. The House adopted such restrictions Nov. 7 by passing an amendment introduced by Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich. On Dec. 8 the Senate rejected, 54-45, a virtually identical amendment introduced by Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb.

The Dec. 14 letters from the bishops' conference were made public late Dec. 15. They constituted the latest in a series of strenuous efforts by the bishops? national organization to influence the direction of major health care reform in the nation ? a project the bishops support firmly as an expression of Catholic social teaching on health care as a fundamental human right.

Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, head of the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, said in his letter on abortion [1] that the current health care reform legislation before the Senate ?explicitly authorizes the use of federal funds to subsidize health plans covering elective abortions for the first time in history.?

He said such legislation, if enacted, would contradict a third-of-a-century ban on federal funding of elective abortions since the first Hyde amendment in 1976.

He said the Senate reaffirmed the Hyde amendment Dec. 13 when it overwhelmingly approved the Consolidated

Appropriations Act, which includes the language: ?No funds appropriated by this Act shall be available to pay for an abortion, or the administrative expenses in connection with any health plan under the federal employees health benefits program which provides and benefits or coverage for abortions.?

He said that every Democratic senator who claimed in the floor debate that the Nelson amendment goes too far voted for the Consolidated Appropriations Act. In fact, he said, the Nelson amendment does exactly the same thing.

?Literally the only substantive difference,? he said, is that the Nelson amendment also explicitly says it would not bar inclusion of elective abortion in unsubsidized health plans or the private purchase of separate supplemental abortion coverage by purchasers of health plans that involve federal subsidies. The Consolidated Appropriations Act does not explicitly mention such exceptions allowing private purchase of abortion coverage.

In the letter urging expansion of Medicaid coverage to legal immigrants [2] who have not yet lived in the United States for five years or more the USCCB argued that ?legal immigrants, who work, pay taxes and are on a path to citizenship, should have access to health care services, such as Medicaid, for which they help pay.?

?Moreover, providing low-income legal immigrants access to Medicaid would help ensure that the general public health of immigrant communities and the nation is served,? the letter said.

It was signed by DiNardo and by Bishops John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Migration, and William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., chairman of the bishops' Domestic Policy Committee.

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

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