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Bishops: Senate health bill remains 'deficient'

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service



A June 24 interfaith rally in support of universal health care in Washington. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

WASHINGTON -- The Senate should not approve its current health reform bill "without incorporating essential changes to ensure" that it "truly protects the life, dignity, consciences and health of all," the chairmen of three committees of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said.

In a letter sent late Dec. 22, about 36 hours before the expected Senate vote Christmas Eve morning, the USCCB urged opposition to the Senate bill and pledged continued efforts to incorporate needed changes during the work of the House-Senate conference committee.

"For many months, our bishops' conference has worked with members of Congress, the administration and others to fashion health care reform legislation that truly protects the life, dignity, health and consciences of all," said the letter signed by Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston and Bishops William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., and John C. Wester of Salt Lake City.

The three chair the USCCB committees on Pro-Life Activities, on Domestic Justice and Human Development and on Migration, respectively.

"We regret to say that in all the areas of our moral concern, the Senate health care reform bill is deficient," the three chairmen added. "Therefore we believe the Senate should not move this bill forward at this time but continue to discuss and approve changes that could make it morally acceptable. Until these fundamental flaws are remedied the bill should be opposed."

The bishops said their biggest problem with the Senate bill was its treatment of abortion funding, which "not only falls short of the House's standard but violates long-standing precedent in all other federal health programs."

In addition to not maintaining the legal status quo on abortion funding that has been supported by President Barack Obama and by the majority of Americans in many polls, the abortion provisions in the manager's amendment to the Senate bill would require purchasers of some health insurance plans "to pay for other people's abortions in a very direct and explicit way," the USCCB letter said.

"There is no provision for individuals to opt out of this abortion payment in federally subsidized plans, so people will be required by law to pay for other people's abortions," it added.

The Senate bill also fails to include provisions to prevent "discrimination against health care providers that decline involvement in abortion" and would not protect the rights of Catholic and other institutions "to provide and purchase health coverage consistent with their moral and religious convictions on other procedures," the chairmen said.

The letter also urged changes in the Senate bill's provisions barring undocumented immigrants from purchasing health insurance from an exchange with their own money and banning legal immigrants from federal health benefit programs for five years.

The USCCB chairmen said the Senate bill would leave more than 23 million people without health insurance, falling short "of what is needed in both policy and moral dimensions."

They urged expansion of Medicaid eligibility, at a minimum, to those living at 133 percent or more of the federal poverty level (about \$30,000 for a family of four in 2009) and an increase in subsidies provided to low-income households.

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Regardless of the outcome of the Dec. 24 Senate vote, "we will work vigorously to incorporate into the final legislation our priorities for upholding conscience rights and long-standing current prohibitions on abortion funding; ensuring affordability and access; and including immigrants," the Dec. 22 letter said. "We hope and pray that the Congress and the country will come together around genuine reform."

In an earlier statement, Cardinal DiNardo said the USCCB would continue to oppose the Senate legislation "unless and until" it is amended to "comply with long-standing Hyde restrictions on federal funding of elective abortions and health plans that include them."

The Hyde amendment prohibits federal funding of abortion except in cases of rape, incest or threat to the woman's life.

On abortion, the USCCB had backed a bipartisan amendment sponsored by Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., and others. Similar to a House-passed measure sponsored by Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., the amendment

would have incorporated the Hyde amendment protections into the health reform bill.

When the Senate tabled Nelson's amendment in a 54-45 vote Dec. 8, Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, USCCB president, and the three USCCB chairmen called it "a grave mistake and a serious blow to genuine health reform."

Nelson joined with the 57 other Senate Democrats and two independents in voting Dec. 19 to end debate on the health reform legislation, ending a Republican filibuster.

Two other procedural votes -- each needing 60 votes -- were required in the Senate before a vote on final passage could take place. The final vote, requiring only a simple majority, was expected Dec. 24.

Several Nebraska religious leaders praised Nelson for supporting the Senate health reform bill.

"Your efforts ensure that we can move ahead with health care reform that protects the dignity of life at every stage and provides critical support for pregnant women and children," said a letter signed by five Catholic priests, a Sister of Mercy and leaders of Lutheran, African Methodist Episcopal, Disciples of Christ, Methodist, Episcopal and Jewish congregations.

"Your willingness to work to make health care more accessible and affordable shows a deep commitment to the moral and ethical principles of the common good," the letter added. "As Nebraskans we are both proud of and grateful for all your difficult work of negotiating pressure from both sides of this extremely important issue; we commend you for making the right decision."

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