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Pro-life challenges change

by Jerry Filteau



Sr. Carol Keehan speaks during a 2007 news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington. Catholic organizations were calling for increased funding for the State Children's Health Insurance Program during the Bush administration. (CNS/CHA/Jay Mallin)

WASHINGTON -- The Obama administration and a Congress narrowly controlled by Democrats present both new challenges and new opportunities for Catholic pro-life advocates on Capitol Hill.

Sr. Carol Keehan, president and CEO of Catholic Health Association and a Daughter of Charity, said in an interview that pro-life advocates have faced different strategic challenges and priorities in recent Republican and Democratic administrations.

During Republican administrations, she said, "we find ourselves spending a lot more time" working to save, or to prevent cutbacks in, social programs that assist pregnant women, help them bring their child to term, promote adoption, and other programs that would reduce the pressure on young women to terminate their pregnancy.

When Democrats are in charge, the primary challenge pro-life advocates face is not so much to prevent

erosion of social programs that assist pregnant women in poverty or provide infant and child support, she said; more energy has to be spent to prevent a relaxation of restrictions on public funding of abortion and to maintain effective conscience protections on abortion and related issues for health care providers.



Political science professor Stephen F. Schneck of The Catholic University of America

told *NCR* that two new factors on the Democratic side have led to some changes in the dynamics of pro-life advocacy.

“One of the differences is that the Obama administration, much more forthrightly than anybody expected, has advocated an approach to reduce the demand for abortion in the United States. So that changes things a little bit, perhaps, in comparison with previous Democratic administrations,” he said.

“Another factor, I think, would be that the Democratic Party has become, here in Washington, more open to pro-lifers than it was in the past,” he said. He cited the emergence of groups such as Democrats for Life and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, which is pro-life but Democratic-leaning.

Also critical to that change, Schneck said, was the conscious decision of the party in 2006 and 2008, led by Rahm Emanuel -- now White House Chief of Staff, but then head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee -- to recruit pro-life Democrats in key states such as Virginia, Ohio and Pennsylvania to run for Congress.

Schneck, who is chairman of Catholic University’s politics department and director of its Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies -- formerly known as the Life Cycle Institute -- said those factors have created “a little more complicated picture on the left side of the dial.”

“On the right side, some people make the argument that the Obama administration, because of what’s viewed on the right as a very strident pro-abortion position, has actually worked to energize the right-to-life movement among conservatives. I think the jury’s still out on whether or not that’s true,” he said.

Along with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Charities USA, the Catholic Health Association has been among the strongest advocates of comprehensive health care reform legislation, while also insisting that any reform should retain long-standing prohibitions on the use of public funds for elective abortions.

“Sometimes these pro-life issues take the form of finding quality care for people who can’t afford it,” Keehan said. “Sometimes they take the form, ‘If you’re pregnant you don’t have to abort your baby because you don’t have any money, we will be there and we’ll find ways to get you care.’”

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The association represents 624 U.S. Catholic hospitals and about 1,400 other health care facilities, by far

the largest group of not-for-profit health care providers in the country.

"Working for pro-life is something that we're always doing," Keehan said. "But there are some areas where Republicans tend to put their efforts on pro-life more than in other areas, and some areas where Democrats tend to put their efforts on pro-life."

As an example of how the battleground shifts from one administration to another, she cited the State Children's Health Insurance Program, known as SCHIP, enacted under the Clinton administration in 1997. Over the next 12 years it provided federal matching funds to states for programs providing health insurance to more than 6 million children in families with modest incomes who are not poor enough to qualify for Medicaid. In some states it was also extended to pregnant women.

During his two terms in office President George W. Bush twice vetoed legislative attempts to expand the program. In February 2009 President Barack Obama signed a bill that expanded the program to reach an additional 4.1 million children, including -- for the first time -- children of legal immigrants without the previously mandated five-year waiting period.

"You know how much effort we put into SCHIP, in spite of some pretty significant efforts [during the Bush administration] to get it not reauthorized," Keehan said. "To us, SCHIP was clearly a pro-life program. I mean it clearly took care of the life and dignity of so many of our children and pregnant women. So that was clearly a challenge in a Republican administration.

"In a Democratic administration we find that not quite as big a challenge. But we find the ability to be sure that we don't have abortion funding, that we don't have an abortion agenda, much more of a challenge," she continued.

"My great hope," she added, "would be that some day we would have a really, truly comprehensive and all-encompassing pro-life agenda so that you would be looking not only at one piece or another, but you'd be seeing the whole as very important.

"We continue to believe that we have a responsibility to speak for life and to do that in whatever piece of the pro-life situation is missing," she said. "In some administrations it seems to be -- in our judgment, in our opinion -- well, if you're really pro-life, where are the services for them? And in others it seems to be not an appreciation of the fact that, wanted or not, intended or not, every baby is a child of God. So we have to be part of protecting every baby's life, not just certain babies' lives."

John Gehring, media director for Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, told NCR he saw signs of "a political and cultural climate converging now that recognizes what Catholics have long identified as a consistent ethic of life."

"The terrain seems to be more fertile for the kind of legislative efforts that can potentially bridge the false divide between pro-life and social justice advocacy," he said.

Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good was formed in 2005 as an effort to find a common ground between the antiabortion conservative and pro-choice liberal extremes by emphasizing the full range of Catholic social teaching, from the sacredness and dignity of all human life to the importance of social programs protecting the vulnerable and needy.

"A Catholic vision for the common good offers a unique "both-and," rather than an "either-or" perspective," said Gehring. "Passing health care reform, for example, will be a historic social justice victory that could also reduce abortions by ensuring women and families have access to critical social

supports.

?The culture wars are still with us, but more elected officials are responsive to voters hungry for common-ground solutions,? he said.

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

Special Coverage for the National March for Life

To mark the 37th annual March for Life in Washington, NCR has prepared a series of articles that will appear on our Web site Jan. 21 and Jan. 22.

- Stammering about abortion, Jan. 21
- Time to rethink antiabortion strategy, Jan. 21
- To Save A Life, Jan. 22: Independent Christian film aimed at teens opens Jan. 22
- Pro-life challenges change, Jan. 22
- Death row survivor tells the real story, Jan. 22
- Eating and the culture of death, Jan. 22

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