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Religious groups urge health care action

Jerry Filteau | Feb. 24, 2010

Sister Adele O'Sullivan, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet who is a medical doctor, examines a patient at the Maricopa Health Care for the Homeless clinic in Phoenix in this 2005 photo. She will now head up a respite service for the homeless in Phoe nix. (CNS photo)

WASHINGTON

As President Obama prepared to meet with members of Congress Feb. 25 in a nationally televised health care summit, the head of the Catholic Health Association, dozens of Catholic theologians and a wide coalition of religious leaders called on legislators to take action together on meaningful health care reform.

On the eve of the summit, U.S. bishops reminded congressional leaders that they have long taught that "health care is a basic human right."

?The price of inaction is simply too high to pay,? Daughter of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, CHA president and CEO, said in a statement Feb. 23.

In a letter to Obama and congressional leaders the same day, more than two dozen leading Catholic theologians and other scholars joined the Catholic Alliance for the Common Good, Sojourners and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in calling reform legislation a task of ?great urgency.?

?Human beings are suffering as a result of skyrocketing health care costs, ever-escalating premiums and draconian choices between paying the rent and taking a sick child to the doctor,? they wrote. ?This is not hyperbole or rhetoric. This is the shameful reality today for millions of American families, senior citizens and children.?

On the eve of the White House Health Care Summit, the U.S. bishops added their voice to the national discussion. In a Feb. 24 letter to congressional leaders, the bishops urged political leaders "to commit themselves to enacting genuine health care reform that will protect the life, dignity, consciences and health of all."

The bishops also cited their longtime support of adequate and affordable health care for all, calling health care a basic human right.

A national interfaith coalition announced Feb. 24 that it was marking the summit with a full-page ad in *The Hill*, a Capitol Hill newspaper, urging lawmakers to ?comprehensively address our broken health care system.?

The ad, in the form of a letter to the president and Congress, was signed by 58 national religious organizations, more than 80 state or regional faith and interfaith organizations and thousands of individuals of different faiths, including 26 national religious leaders.

As a starting point for the summit, the White House Feb. 22 unveiled an 11-page Obama proposal that it said would call for amending the Senate?s Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act to bring in administration priorities and policy elements of the reform bill passed earlier by the House.

Of the need for reform, Keehan said, ?Men, women and children continue to suffer because they cannot afford care or coverage.? She added that the health care system in its current form ?will soon consume 17.3 percent of GDP, a figure that is detrimental to our economic recovery and unsustainable for future generations.?

?The American people are tired of partisan bickering and want lawmakers to find common ground toward creating a stronger, more equitable health care system,? she said. ?The current window of opportunity is small, which is why we encourage summit participants and other key leaders to move from argument and misinformation to consensus and collaboration ? now.?

Americans ?expect lawmakers to step up and agree to sensible policies to protect human life and dignity, improve quality and control runaway costs,? she said.

The interfaith letter released Feb. 24 was sponsored by Faithful Reform in Health Care, a large interfaith coalition that has been working to mobilize people of all faiths for health reform, and the Washington Interreligious Staff Community.

?We now stand closer than ever before to historic health care reform,? the letter said. ?Turning back now could mean justice delayed for another generation and an unprecedented opportunity lost.?

Without reform, it said, tens of millions of Americans will remain uninsured, health care costs will continue to climb faster than wages, businesses will face growing pressure to drop health coverage for workers, and ?the nation?s economy ? and its ability to create jobs ? will suffer.?

Calling adequate health care a matter of justice, the letter noted the Rev. Martin Luther King?s famous statement, ?Justice too long delayed is justice denied.?

?Less well known,? it added, ?is his admonition that ?of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane.??

The letter from the U.S. bishops' conference noted that Catholic bishops "have long supported adequate and affordable health care for all, because health care is a basic human right." The letter continued:

> "As pastors and teachers, we believe genuine health care reform must protect human life and dignity from conception to natural death, not threaten them, especially for the voiceless and vulnerable.
>
> "We believe health care legislation must respect the consciences of providers, taxpayers, purchasers of insurance and others, not violate them.
>
> "We believe universal coverage should be truly universal and should not be denied to those in need

> because of their condition, age, where they come from or when they arrive here. Providing affordable and accessible health care that clearly reflects these fundamental principles is a public good, moral imperative and urgent national priority."

The bishops said they would not comment on specific health care reform proposals but pledged that they would work for passage of legislation that met the criteria they outlined in the letter.

They also pledged to "oppose legislation that does not meet" their criteria.

Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.

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