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Two Catholic, pro-life supporters back Senate bill

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service



Karen Stangl of Youngstown, Ohio, rallies in support of universal health care in Washington in this June 24 file photo. (CNS)

WASHINGTON -- Two Catholic House members who describe themselves as lifelong supporters of pro-life causes said they are convinced that the Senate-approved health reform legislation headed for a House vote does not expand federal funding of abortion.

Reps. Dale Kildee, D-Mich., and Charlie Wilson, D-Ohio, said at a teleconference sponsored by Faith in Public Life that they would vote for the Senate bill. The House vote was expected to take place March 21.

Kildee, who as a young man spent six years in a Catholic seminary, said he had "always been pro-life" and had sought the counsel of his priest and "read the Senate abortion prohibition more than dozen times" before making his decision.

"I'll be 81 years old this September, and at this point in my life I'm not going to change my mind and start supporting abortion," he said. "I'm not going to risk my eternal salvation."

But his stand is in contrast to that of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which has said the current Senate language would expand abortion funding in several ways and would require some people to pay a premium that would finance other people's abortions. The bishops have called for a "no" vote on the Senate bill unless changes are made.

Wilson said he was "confident that the Senate language upholds my pro-life values" and does not provide any federal funding for abortion.

"I've been a pro-life Catholic my entire career," he said in response to a question. "I have proven that and walked that walk. I do not think we are doing anything to hurt our people."

Both congressmen were supporters of the abortion language proposed by Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., and accepted into the House health reform bill. The U.S. bishops have backed that language over what was adopted in the Senate bill, which they say "contains no relevant provision to prevent the direct use of federal funds for elective abortions."

Two other Democrats who voted for the Stupak amendment -- Reps. John Boccieri of Ohio and Thomas Perriello of Virginia -- announced in the days before the vote that they had accepted the Senate abortion language, although Perriello did not say whether he would vote for the bill.

Bishop Robert N. Lynch of St. Petersburg, Fla., commented on Perriello's decision in his blog, calling him "a conservative pro-life Catholic" who was "convinced that the Senate version would guarantee that no federal funds would find their way to abortion services."

"If he moves to accept the Senate version, that will be a major moment for the pro-life movement given his past perfect record," the bishop said.

Bishop Lynch, who serves on the board of trustees of the Catholic Health Association, said he supported the bishops' stand on the abortion language "until I have some certainty that we are wrong" but noted that their position "is being refuted by usually reliable sources."

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Among them is Sr. Carol Keehan, a Daughter of Charity who is CHA president and CEO, whom Bishop Lynch called "a good woman of the church, no liberal troublemaker by any stretch of the imagination and a woman who as CEO turned Providence Hospital around from certain bankruptcy and closing to a viable facility in the northeast section of the District [of Columbia] serving an increasingly poor and marginalized community."

Keehan told Bishop Lynch that she believes the Senate bill, "as written now, meets the test of no federal funding for abortion. We said that we wanted that preserved in the reconciliation bill, not fixed. ... We would not have taken the position we took if we were hoping for a fix. It had to be already in place and it is."

At least one Catholic health system announced, however, that it did not support the CHA position.

Sisters of St. Francis Health Services, which runs eight hospitals in Indiana and Illinois, said the health reform bill currently before the House "still contains language that would allow the federal funding of abortion, as well as restrictions on conscience clauses that protect health care providers (individuals and

institutions) who morally object to abortion."

At the March 18 teleconference, in addition to the two congressmen, participants also included Francis Xavier Doyle, a former associate general secretary of the U.S. bishops, and Sr. Simone Campbell, a Sister of Social Service who is executive director of the national Catholic social justice lobby Network.

Doyle thanked Kildee, Wilson and other pro-life members of Congress "for taking a thoughtful and deliberative approach to addressing this monumental challenge."

"You have followed your conscience and maintained important principles that reflect core values in a way that is often rare in politics today," he added.

Doyle noted that "Catholic teaching has long promoted universal health care as a fundamental human right."

"No legislation is perfect, but this legislation is the first step in reforming a broken system," he said.

Faith in Public Life, which sponsored the teleconference, describes itself as a "strategy center advancing faith in the public square as a positive and unifying force for justice, compassion and the common good."

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