

## California bishop urges Catholics to sign up for health insurance

Catholic News Service | Mar. 18, 2014  
San Bernardino, Calif.

Bishop Gerald Barnes of San Bernardino urged Catholics in his diocese to comply with federal law and sign up for health insurance if they have not already done so.

In a March 11 letter, he said he wished to provide "some clarification and some direction regarding the new federal health care law."

"As you may know, the Affordable Care Act requires that all legal residents of the country carry health insurance by April 1. Failure to comply with this law will result in fines that increase progressively each year," he wrote.

The bishop said the Hispanic communities in particular have had a lower percentage of health insurance enrollments.

"However, to ignore this law or put it off will result in negative financial consequences for you and your family," he wrote.

Barnes said although the insurance requirement does not apply to those who have undocumented status, it does apply to children with legal residency in the United States. "Please be aware of this and your responsibility to sign your child up for health insurance immediately," he wrote in letters in both English and Spanish.

The bishop pointed out that the Catholic church "has raised objection to elements of the law that relate to contraception and abortion services that might be provided through it. We continue to address these issues with lawmakers and through the courts, which I fully support."

"However, these factors do not mean that we, as Catholics, should disobey the new health care law," he added.

The bishop said that if Catholics in his diocese have an insurance plan that "includes services that are objectionable to our faith, which most plans in California do, our response is to not utilize these services."

"We do this through an informed conscience and reflection on the teachings of our church about the value and dignity of every human life and God's plan for creation," he added.

He stressed that the Affordable Care Act is "now part of civil law and as faithful citizens we are obligated to follow it."

Barnes said the law offers an opportunity for many who have not had health insurance to obtain it which he said will "affirm the dignity of many people and improve the quality of life" -- a chief reason the U.S. bishops have been advocating for health care reform, he noted.

The bishop urged those who need help signing up for health insurance to contact the diocesan Catholic Charities

agency or the two Catholic hospitals in the diocese.

The official deadline for individuals to sign up for health insurance, including policies purchased on the exchanges is March 31, but a policy directive issued March 5 by an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said that deadline could be pushed to Oct. 1, 2016, in states that recognize a "hardship exemption."

According to the HHS Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services directive, the extension to 2016 would apply to individuals whose insurance policies were canceled under the health care law and need more time to get adequate coverage. It also would apply to individuals who currently cannot afford any health care policy.

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