

Bishops to Congress: Set aside partisanship for genuine health reform

WASHINGTON - Three leading U.S. bishops called on members of Congress Jan. 26 to “set aside partisan divisions and special-interest pressures” to achieve genuine health reform.

“The health care debate, with all its political and ideological conflict, seems to have lost its central moral focus and policy priority, which is to ensure that affordable, quality, life-giving care is available to all,” said a 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 U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ committees on Pro-Life Activities, on Domestic Justice and Human Development and on Migration, respectively.

In the two-and-a-half-page letter, the USCCB leaders outlined their “fundamental principles” for health care reform, saying it must:

- “Protect human life and dignity, not threaten them.”
- “Respect the consciences of providers, taxpayers and others, not violate them.”
- “Be truly universal and ... not be denied to those in need because of their condition, age, where they come from or when they arrive here.”
- Restrain costs and apply them “equitably across the spectrum of payers.”

Although the letter did not refer specifically to the Jan. 19 election of Republican Scott Brown of Massachusetts to the U.S. Senate, the bishops said “political contexts have changed” but “the moral and policy failure that leaves tens of millions of our sisters and brothers without access to health care still remains.”

Brown's election broke up the Democrats' 60-vote supermajority in the Senate, leaving the future of health reform legislation up in the air. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has said no action would be taken on health reform in the Senate until after Brown is seated.

In their letter, the USCCB leaders repeated their criticism of health reform bills passed by the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Both bills, they said, "leave between 18 (million) and 23 million people in our nation without health insurance."

"Although recently passed legislation in the House and Senate may not move forward in either of their current forms, there are provisions in the bills that should be included in - and some that should be removed from - any proposals for health care reform," they added.

The bishops called for extending Medicaid eligibility to people at 133 percent of the federal poverty level (about \$29,300 for a family of four, under 2009 guidelines that have been extended at least until March 1) and said "the best affordability elements" of each bill should be included in any final legislation.

They faulted both bills for failing to protect the conscience rights of health care providers, insurers, consumers and institutions beyond the abortion issue and said the Senate bill "violates the long-standing federal policy against the use of federal funds for elective abortions and health plans that include such abortions."

"We believe legislation that fails to comply with this policy and precedent is not true health care reform and should be opposed until this fundamental problem is remedied," the bishops said.

The letter also reiterated the bishops' support for allowing undocumented immigrants to purchase health insurance through the proposed health exchanges with their own money. The Senate bill prohibits such purchases.

"To proactively prohibit a human being from accessing health care is mean-spirited and contrary to the general public health," the USCCB leaders said.

They also called for removal of the five-year ban on legal immigrants accessing federal health plans such as Medicaid, saying that those who “pay taxes and are on a path to citizenship should be able to access programs for which their taxes help pay.”

In his State of the Union address Jan. 27, President Barack Obama urged Congress to step up its efforts to achieve health reform this year.

“Do not walk away from reform. Not now. Not when we are so close,” Obama said. “Let us find a way to come together and finish the job for the American people.”

Sister Carol Keehan, a Daughter of Charity who is president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association, affirmed that message in a Jan. 28 letter to members of Congress.

“We understand the political realities and concerns with passage of such important and far-reaching legislation,” she wrote. “But we firmly believe that now is not the time to let those concerns derail what may be the last opportunity of our lifetime to address the continuing shame of allowing so many individuals and families in our nation to go without access to affordable health care.”