

Major concerns remain unresolved in health reform bills, bishops say

WASHINGTON - None of the major health reform bills before Congress adequately addresses the concerns raised by the U.S. bishops in the areas of abortion, conscience protection, immigrants and affordability, said the heads of three major committees of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Oct. 8.

"If final legislation does not meet our principles, we will have no choice but to oppose the bill," said a letter to all members of Congress from Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y.; Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia; and Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City.

"Much-needed reform of our health care system must be pursued in ways that serve the life and dignity of all, never in ways that undermine or violate these fundamental values," they added. "We will work tirelessly to remedy these central problems and help pass real reform that clearly protects the life, dignity and health of all."

The three chair the USCCB committees on Domestic Justice and Human Development, Pro-Life Activities and Migration, respectively.

The bishops reiterated their earlier calls on Congress to ensure that any health reform plan:

- Exclude mandated coverage of abortions and incorporate long-standing federal policies against taxpayer-funded abortions and in favor of conscience rights.
- Make quality health care affordable and accessible to everyone.
- Include effective measures to safeguard the health of immigrants, their children and all of society, with legal immigrants given "comprehensive, affordable and timely access to health care coverage" and an adequate safety net provided to others.

"We sincerely hope that the legislation will not fall short of our criteria," the USCCB

leaders said.

But they said they “remain apprehensive” at committee votes that defeated amendments that would have protected freedom of conscience and ensured that no taxpayer money went to abortions.

“If acceptable language in these areas cannot be found, we will have to oppose the health care bill vigorously,” the bishops said.

“We remain committed to working with the administration, congressional leadership and our allies to produce final health reform legislation that will reflect our principles,” they added.

The Senate Finance Committee, which recently completed work on more than 500 amendments to a health reform bill proposed by Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., the committee chairman, was expected to take a final vote on the amended legislation Oct. 13.