

Optimism about change spurs participants' involvement in health event

WASHINGTON - Two participants in a nationwide teleconference organized by religious organizations that are supporting health care reform said they were optimistic that legislation will pass this year and that they don't believe government funding of abortion will be a part of the bill.

A Colorado priest and a small business owner from Florida were among the Catholics who contributed brief discussions of their experiences to a national phone and Internet-based conference call Aug. 19 that included remarks by President Barack Obama.

The event, organized by the groups Faith in Public Life, PICO National Network, Sojourners and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, featured more than a dozen people representing mostly religious organizations who read short statements or asked questions of Melody Barnes, the White House director of domestic policy.

In his remarks, Obama addressed several of what he termed lies "that have been put out there in order to discourage people from meeting what I consider to be a core ethical and moral obligation. And that is that we look out for one another."

Among them, Obama said are claims that "this is all going to mean government funding of abortion. Not true."

The Hyde amendment, enacted into law in various forms since 1976, prohibits federal funding of abortions except in cases of rape, incest and danger to the mother's life. But there are fears among pro-life organizations that, without specific wording prohibiting it, health care legislation could open the door to use of taxpayer money for abortions.

Obama also said a provision in a House bill - one of several pieces of legislation on health care reform being considered in Congress - to allow Medicare reimbursement

for doctors who counsel patients about setting up a living will or other end-of-life decisions is not about “setting up death panels that would decide on whether elderly people get to live or die. That is just an extraordinary lie.”

During the teleconference, Father Bob Amundsen, pastor of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Lafayette, Colo., told of hosting public meetings with other churches and Democratic Sen. Michael Bennett of Colorado and sponsoring a movie night to view and discuss a documentary on health care.

Father Amundsen told Catholic News Service in a later phone conversation that he got hooked into the event through his long involvement with PICO, a national network of faith-based community organizations founded by two Jesuit priests in the 1970s as the Pacific Institute for Community Organization. PICO today stands for People Improving Communities through Organizing.

Father Amundsen started the Denver affiliate of PICO, the Metro Organizations for People, in 1979.

He said the idea behind the teleconference, which organizers said drew 140,000 participants, was “to let the president know that all over the country faith communities are in touch with each other about health care reform.”

Father Amundsen said he and his associate pastor talked at Masses the weekend of Aug. 15-16 about health care, urging people to keep after their members of Congress to support health care reform that meets the guidelines set out by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

As outlined on the health care reform Web site www.usccb.org/healthcare, the USCCB says legislation should:

- Include health care coverage for all people from conception until natural death, and continue the federal ban on funding for abortions.
- Include access for all with a special concern for the poor.
- Pursue the common good and preserve pluralism, including freedom of conscience.

- Restrain costs and apply costs equitably among payers.

He told CNS his mostly lower middle-class parish includes many Latino immigrants who do not have health insurance. The community is currently trying to raise money to help one such family, whose 13-year-old son has leukemia. They've been told they need to raise more than \$900,000 to cover the costs of a bone-marrow transplant and follow-up treatment.

"A guy who sells fruit and vegetables can't raise that kind of money," the priest said.

Father Amundsen said he has heard repeated assurances from White House contacts that the legislation will not include federal funding of abortion, but he believes it's important to keep up pressure to keep the bill's language abortion-neutral, as Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, head of the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, has urged.

"I have a great sense there is not enough support to define it in the bill one way or the other," said the Denver archdiocesan priest.

Linda Filippini, who owns a small business in Melbourne, Fla., and struggles to pay for health insurance for herself and her husband, told CNS she also has been assured by representatives of the White House that legislation will include conscience protection clauses for health care providers.

She said her fellow parishioners at Holy Name of Jesus Church are "all over the map" about whether they support various proposals.

"But when I start asking questions, like 'what if you lost your job?' and 'is it fair that your neighbor can't afford insurance?' or 'how much have your insurance premiums gone up in the last few years?' they tend to think further than their own interests," Filippini said.

Filippini and Father Amundsen were both optimistic about some form of health care legislation passing this year.

"I don't know if it's going to be everything that's on the table now; there will be some compromises made, but I'm hopeful something will get passed," Filippini said.