

# Senate urged to include unborn, immigrants in children's health plan

WASHINGTON - Expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program should cover pregnant mothers and their unborn children, as well as legal immigrants who have not yet been in the country for five years, the head of the U.S. bishops' domestic policy committee told senators.

Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., chairman of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, also said in a letter to senators that SCHIP plans at the state and federal levels must not "promote or fund abortion or ignore parental rights to secure needed health care for their children in ways that do not violate their moral or religious convictions."

The bishop wrote to members of the Senate Jan. 14, the day the House of Representatives passed SCHIP legislation that includes legal immigrant children and pregnant women who are legal immigrants. The letter was made public just before the Senate began consideration of the legislation Jan. 26.

"We have encouraged Congress to strengthen, expand and improve the State Children's Health Insurance Program," Bishop Murphy wrote. "We believe Congress has a unique opportunity and the responsibility to improve the program and garner strong bipartisan support by enacting significant legislation that affirms the life and dignity of all."

The SCHIP reauthorization bill that passed the House by a 289-139 vote Jan. 14 would expand the joint federal-state program by about \$31.5 billion over the next four and a half years. It would be funded by increasing the federal tax on cigarettes by 61 cents to a dollar per pack.

The Senate Finance Committee approved a similar version of the legislation late Jan. 15, and President Barack Obama has said he hopes to sign the reauthorization bill as

one of his first acts as president.

Bishop Murphy also called for a change that would codify the inclusion of unborn children and their mothers as beneficiaries of the program. Since 2002, the Department of Health and Human Services has allowed states to interpret the word “child” to include those between conception and birth, and 13 states have adapted their programs to include pregnant women and their unborn children under this option.

“This move would allow states to retain choice and flexibility in how best to provide essential health services to pregnant women and children,” he said.

“Access to prenatal care will allow more children to be born in good health, without a need for more extensive and expensive medical intervention,” the letter to senators added. “States will be able to choose improved coverage for unborn children and their mothers, without being required to expand state funding for abortions, which would be especially tragic in a program dedicated to the lives and health of children.”

The immigration section of the legislation would waive the current five-year waiting period before legal immigrant pregnant women and legal immigrant children could be covered under SCHIP.

“During the immigration debate we heard much about how legal immigrants came ‘the right way’ and enrich and contribute to our economy and society,” Bishop Murphy said. “Restoration of health coverage access to legal immigrants is the right thing to do, and has been supported by members of Congress from both parties.”