

Tucson Bishop urges congresswoman to fight to simplify health reform plans

TUCSON, Ariz. - Tucson Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas said Aug. 31 that the "complexity of the proposals" for national health care reform has caused "a great deal of misunderstanding and fear" and U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona should fight to "simplify and clarify" the issues.

The bishop spoke publicly after joining with 20 southern Arizona faith leaders for a private 90-minute meeting with Giffords.

"We're all stakeholders," Bishop Kicanas said at a news conference at the Diocese of Tucson's pastoral center, where the faith leaders - Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and Jewish - gathered at Giffords' invitation as part of her pulse-taking of constituents in the 8th congressional district.

Giffords, a Democrat, said the leaders offered "different points of view" but agreed the goal was "affordable, quality health care," and she said her "overarching desire is to slow down ..., to talk more concretely and be sure people understand" what's at stake.

Giffords noted that members of the clergy frequently are called to help individuals confronting a medical crisis and thus had "a unique perspective" to offer.

Bishop Kicanas said the Catholic Church "is deeply concerned about universal health care, particularly for the poor and vulnerable" and he said the group agreed there was a need "for civil and respectful dialogue" on the subject.

The bishop, who is vice president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said he outlined the church's concerns that any legislation be "abortion-neutral" and respect "rights of conscience ... so that no individual or organization will be compelled to act against their conscience in matters of health care."

Giffords has said she believes pregnancy terminations should be covered if the life or health of a mother is at risk, but “elective procedures should not be paid for with taxpayer money.”

Bishop Kicanas said later that no law “should compel anyone to pay for the destruction of human life, whether through government funding or mandatory coverage of abortion. Any such action would be morally wrong.”

Declaring that today’s “troubled” system “leaves too many without health care benefits,” the bishop said “formulating such legislation will demand wisdom, foresight and courage.”

The costs of health care, too, need to be restrained and shared equitably under any new legislation, Bishop Kicanas said.

“In the Catholic tradition health care is a basic human right – not a privilege,” he said. “It is a fundamental issue of human life and dignity.”

Rabbi Tom Louchheim of Congregation Or Chadash cited the need for “a sense of compassion” with “justice and fairness” in any new law.

Rabbi Stephanie Aaron of Congregation Chaverim said the nationwide health care debate has involved “a lot of screaming and not a lot of listening.” Listening, she said, would be “a great benefit.”

Said the Rev. Grady Scott of Grace Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Tucson: “We do need rational debate. People have the spirit and determination to deal with this issue. We can solve this problem. That’s my prayer; that’s my hope.”

In addition to these religious leaders, representatives of the Jewish Federation of Southern Arizona, Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest and Catholic Community Services of Southern Arizona attended the meeting.