

USCCB sees mixed results on health reform in Senate committee

WASHINGTON – The Senate Finance Committee made some progress toward a more affordable health care reform plan but failed to address concerns about abortion, conscience rights and the health of immigrants, officials of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said after the committee finished its work on its proposal Oct. 2.

The committee rejected amendments that would have written into the bill the long-standing ban on federal subsidies for benefits packages that cover abortions, with rare exceptions, and would have forbidden federal agencies, and state and local governments receiving federal funds under the bill, to discriminate against health care providers that decline to perform, refer for or pay for abortions.

“The bill remains deeply flawed on these issues and must be corrected,” said Richard Doerflinger, associate director of the USCCB Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities. “These problems must be corrected on the House and Senate floor.”

On the inclusion of immigrants, the committee defeated amendments opposed by the USCCB that would have placed additional restrictions on legal immigrants and their families in accessing health care, but failed to improve the access immigrants currently have.

“Legal immigrants, who work hard and pay taxes, should be treated equally with U.S. citizens,” said Kevin Appleby, director of migration policy and public affairs for the USCCB. “It is counterproductive to the general public health to leave them outside of the system, unable to access preventive treatment and dependent on emergency care.”

Kathy Saile, USCCB director of domestic social development, said the bill took some steps toward improved affordability, but leaves “many families still vulnerable to high health care costs.”

“As Congress continues to debate health care reform, it should take further steps to

help at-risk poor and low-income families,” she said, urging, for example, the “expansion of access to programs such as Medicaid.”

In a Sept. 30 letter, bishops representing three USCCB committees called on senators to insist that any final health reform bill exclude mandated coverage of abortion, protect conscience rights, safeguard the health of immigrants and protect “the life, dignity and health of all.” They also said affordability should be a major consideration, so that health reform would be “truly universal and genuinely affordable.”

The letter was signed by Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development; Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, chairman of the Committee on Pro-Life Activities; and Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, chairman of the Committee on Migration.

Although the final committee vote was not expected until the week of Oct. 5, the Senate Finance Committee completed its markup of the health reform plan proposed by Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., the committee chairman, in the early morning hours Oct. 2.

In their letter, the bishops said none of the health reform proposals considered in committee, including the Baucus bill, has “met President (Barack) Obama’s challenge of barring use of federal dollars for abortion and maintaining current conscience laws.”

“These deficiencies must be corrected,” they added.

In his Sept. 9 address to a joint session of Congress on health care reform, Obama said, “Under our plan, no federal dollars will be used to fund abortions, and federal conscience laws will remain in place.”

On immigrants, the bishops’ letter suggested several “effective ways to safeguard the health of immigrants, their children and all of society,” including:

- “An adequate safety net for those who remain uncovered.”
- Elimination of the five-year waiting period before legal immigrants can enroll in

Medicaid.

- An end to barriers, such as waiting periods to obtain subsidies, when immigrants seek to obtain private health insurance.
- Health coverage of pregnant women giving birth to U.S. citizen children, no matter what the women's legal status.

On the issue of affordability, the USCCB letter said the debate over health care reforms "must begin with the principle that decent health care is not a privilege, but a right and a requirement to protect the life and dignity of every person."

Health coverage should not be dependent on an individual's "stage of life, where or whether they or their parents work, how much they earn, where they live or where they were born," the bishops said.

But for lower-income families, "significant premiums and cost-sharing charges can serve as barriers to obtaining coverage or seeing a doctor," they added.

The Baucus bill received specific criticism on affordability from the bishops, who said it could require families living just above the federal poverty line to pay up to 25 percent of their income on out-of-pocket health care costs.

"We urge Congress to limit premiums or to exempt families earning less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level from monthly premiums," the bishops said. "We also recommend limiting co-payments and other costs which could discourage needed care. ... We support the increase in eligibility levels in Medicaid to no less than 135 percent of the federal poverty level for all citizens and immigrants residing lawfully in the United States."

In 2009, the federal poverty level for a family of four in the continental United States was \$22,050.

In their letter, the bishops reminded senators that "health care choices are not just political, technical or economic, but also moral."

"This legislation is about life and death, who can take their children to the doctor

and who cannot, who can afford decent health care coverage and who are left to fend for themselves,” they added. “Health care reform especially needs to protect those at the beginning of life and at its end, the most vulnerable and the voiceless.”