

Virginia bans abortion coverage in state health insurance exchanges

RICHMOND, Va. – Virginia became the seventh state to bar abortion coverage from being offered by private insurance companies through the new state-run health insurance exchanges that were mandated by the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the sweeping health-reform law passed last year by Congress.

While the state's House of Delegates voted 61-36 for the ban, a deadlocked 20-20 Senate vote required a tiebreaking vote to be cast by Virginia's lieutenant governor, Bill Bolling, April 6.

The vote on abortion coverage was an amendment to the original bill that creates the exchanges. It had been passed by state lawmakers earlier in the year during its regular session, but Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell, a Republican and a Catholic, exercised his right under Virginia law to offer amendments to bills once passed during the regular session.

The language in McDonnell's amendment prohibits abortion on demand but permits abortion in the cases of rape, incest and when the mother's life is endangered.

The other states to have banned abortion coverage on state health insurance exchanges are Arizona, Idaho, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri and Tennessee. The states were taking advantage of a clause in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act which holds that "a state may elect to prohibit abortion coverage in qualified health plans offered through an exchange in such state if such state enacts a law to provide for such a prohibition."

Another three states restrict abortion coverage in health insurance policies regardless of whether those insurers participate in statewide exchanges, according to Jeff Caruso, executive director of the Virginia Catholic Conference, public policy arm of the state's two Catholic dioceses.

"People should not be forced to pay for other people's abortions. This amendment goes a long way toward upholding that principle," Caruso told Catholic News

Service in an April 8 telephone interview from Richmond.

The April 6 vote came during a one-day reconvening session of the state's General Assembly to consider amendments proposed by the governor.

Also passed during the reconvening session was a McDonnell amendment to the budget bill that provides funding for abstinence education. It, too, met a 20-20 deadlock in the state Senate, requiring a tiebreaking vote by Bolling, who voted in favor of the amendment.

"This shows how critically important grass-roots networks are," Caruso said. An April 7 "victory alert" email from the Virginia Catholic Conference to its supporters gave credit to the Family Foundation, the Virginia Society for Human Life, the Virginia Assembly of Independent Baptists and Americans United for Life for their role in galvanizing opinion in favor of the two amendments.

Caruso ranked the two votes as among the biggest wins the state Catholic conference had during the Virginia legislative session, which ended for the year April 6. He said an important win during the regular session was passage of a bill to create new regulations on abortion clinics. It requires the state Board of Health to regulate abortion clinics as hospitals rather than as physicians' offices.

"That's going to have a significant impact," he predicted, adding that like the two measures handled in the reconvening session, the clinic bill also faced a 20-20 vote in the Senate and passed with a tiebreaking vote by Bolling.

"It was the identical 20-20 vote in all three cases," Caruso said.