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Bishop: 'yes' to universal health care; 'no' to abortion funding

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WASHINGTON -- Health care is a matter of human life and dignity, a bishop wrote in a July 17 letter to Congress on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"Health care is not just another issue for the church or for a healthy society," wrote Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., chairman of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

The letter outlined the bishops' health care reform priorities, namely respect for human life and universal, affordable access. A copy of the letter was released by the USCCB July 21.

Bishop Murphy warned against the inclusion of abortion coverage in any reform plan, saying that Americans should not be forced to pay for the destruction of human life through government funding or mandatory coverage.

Pro-life activists say that unless language to specifically exclude abortion coverage is part of any reform measure abortion will be covered.

The bishop also said it is imperative to maintain freedom of conscience for health care providers or insurers who refuse to provide or fund abortions or make referrals for abortions.

"Making the legislation 'abortion-neutral' in this sense will be essential for widely accepted reform," he said.

The letter also outlined specific ways to make coverage universal and affordable.

Congress should limit premiums and co-payments and increase eligibility levels, Bishop Murphy wrote. Families earning less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level should be exempt from monthly premiums, he said.

Even if health care reform is implemented, he noted that some people will still be without insurance and so the clinics and hospitals that are their safety nets for care must be guaranteed sufficient funding.

"We have a responsibility to ensure that no one is left without the ability to see a doctor when he or she is sick or get emergency care when his or her health is at risk," Bishop Murphy said.

He reiterated the bishops' appeal that lawmakers give legal immigrants equal access to health care by repealing the requirement that they be in this country for five years before they can have access to Medicaid and by ensuring that pregnant women who will give birth in the United States, as well as their unborn children, are eligible for health care regardless of their status.

He called for the repeal of "sponsor-deeming" as well. This is when an immigrant's Medicaid eligibility is

determined by combining his or her income and a portion of his or her financial sponsor's income.

Bishop Murphy said the Catholic Church has a stake in the health care issue and is an authority on it because it "provides health care, purchases health care and picks up the pieces of a failing health care system."

"The Catholic community encounters and serves the sick and uninsured in our emergency rooms, shelters and on the doorsteps of our parishes," he said.

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