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House panel rejects abortion ban in health reform

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- Despite the support of a U.S. cardinal and its own initial approval, the House Energy and Commerce Committee July 30 rejected an amendment to a House health care reform bill that would have prohibited any mandated abortion coverage, except in cases of rape, incest or life-threatening danger to the mother.

Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, had urged the committee to approve a one-paragraph amendment to the America's Affordable Health Choices Act introduced by Reps. Joseph R. Pitts, R-Pa., Bart Stupak, D-Mich., and Roy Blunt, R-Mo.

"No provision of this act ... shall impose, or shall be construed to impose, any requirement for coverage of abortion, or access to abortion, or to authorize or permit the recommendation for, or imposition of, any such requirement," except in limited circumstances, the amendment said.

Approved by the committee on a 31-27 vote, the amendment was brought up for another vote after a 35-24 vote to reconsider it. The second time around, one Democrat changed his vote and another who had not voted previously voted "no," leading to the defeat of the amendment, with 29 for and 30 against.

The committee then took up a seven-page amendment proposed by Rep. Lois Capps, D-Calif., which would prohibit abortion coverage as part of a federally mandated minimum benefits package but would require at least one insurance plan in each "premium rating area" to cover abortion.

The National Right to Life Committee called the Capps amendment a "phony compromise" that would lead to "elective abortions being covered under the government-operated 'public plan' the bill would create, and would allow federal subsidies to flow to private insurance plans that cover elective abortions."

Deirdre A. McQuade, assistant director for policy and communications in the bishops' Secretariat of Pro-

Life Activities, said her office was disappointed at the defeat of the Pitts-Stupak-Blunt amendment and passage of the "so-called compromise" Capps amendment.

But she said other amendments dealing with abortion were likely to be proposed as the various health care reform bills make their way through Congress.

"We're several steps away from being able to say we do or do not support this or that bill," she added.

In a July 29 letter to the committee, Cardinal Rigali said a "fundamental requirement" for health reform legislation is that it "respect human life and rights of conscience."

"Much-needed reform must not become a vehicle for promoting an 'abortion rights' agenda or reversing long-standing current policies against federal abortion mandates and funding," the cardinal said. "In this sense we urge you to make this legislation 'abortion-neutral' by preserving long-standing federal policies that prevent government promotion of abortion and respect conscience rights."

"As longtime supporters of genuine health care reform, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is working to ensure that needed health reform is not undermined by abandoning long-standing and widely supported policies against abortion funding and mandates and in favor of conscience protection," he added.

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