

Obama defends health care reform to faith leaders

Jerry Filteau | Aug. 20, 2009



Hundreds of supporters of health care reform gather Aug. 17 in Phoenix where President Obama was addressing the Veterans of Foreign Wars. (CNS photo)

WASHINGTON -- President Barack Obama called health care reform part of "our core ethical and moral obligation to one another" during a national teleconference Aug. 19.

The interfaith coalition that sponsored the 40-minute teleconference said that 140,000 people across the country, many of them faith leaders in their local communities, joined in the teleconference, either by phone or via one of several Web sites that carried the audio stream live.

The session, titled "Forty Minutes for Health Reform," was part of a broader interfaith effort in August and September titled "Forty Days for Health Reform."

John Gehring, senior writer for Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, a co-sponsor of the effort, called the teleconference "an incredible success" that highlighted "the faith community's unique role in raising the moral and ethical dimensions of health care reform."

Obama, who joined the teleconference for about five minutes at the end, said, "The one thing that you all share is a moral conviction: You know that the debate over health care goes to the heart of who we are as a people. I believe that nobody in American should be denied health care because he or she lacks insurance."

Before Obama came on line, most of the teleconference was devoted to witness by faith leaders and others to the kinds of issues everyday Americans confront in today's health system.

Halfway through the session Melody Barnes, White House domestic policy director, fielded questions from selected participants about what the health care reform would or would not do.

Patricia Milot, a parish nurse at St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Parish in Orefield, Pa., said many Catholics she has talked to support health care reform but are concerned whether the reform will remove restrictions on federal funding of abortion or change conscience protections for health care providers that are currently in place possible government funding.

"Can you assure us that we can support health care reform without sacrificing our religious and moral values?" she asked.

Barnes responded, "The president has said that it's long-standing policy that federal funds won't be used for abortion coverage," and health care reform does not aim to change that.

She added, "The president has also committed [himself] to maintain well-crafted conscience protections for health providers. There are existing conscience clause laws on the books that have and will protect the rights of providers."

Among participants who described current problems in the U.S. health care system was Karla Carranza, a 15-year-old parishioner at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Denver.

She said neither of her parents could obtain health insurance where they worked. They were covered by Medicaid until a few months ago, "when my parents were told that our household income was \$6 over the Medicaid limit" and coverage was terminated, she said.

"I have scoliosis, but since my family lost Medicaid I have not seen a chiropractor," she said. She added that her mother has several health problems including high blood pressure and cholesterol, but she can no longer afford medications to treat them.

"I don't want my mom to die. I want my parents to be there as I grow up," Carranza said.

Obama decried the "divisive and deceptive attacks" on health care reform, including the "ludicrous" claim "that we are somehow setting up 'death panels' that will decide whether elderly people live or die."

"That is just an extraordinary lie," he said. He said the claim refers to a provision in the House legislation under which Medicare would reimburse patients for costs of a voluntary consultation with their doctor if they are considering a living will or decisions on other end-of-life issues.

"It's entirely voluntary," Obama said. "It gives you an option that people who can afford fancy lawyers already exercise."

He reiterated that the reform would not provide health insurance for illegal immigrants or federal funding for abortion, as claimed by some opponents.

"These are all fabrications" by opponents of "what I consider a core ethical and moral obligation, and that is that we look out for one another," he said.

In addition to Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, Catholic co-sponsors of the health reform effort are the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Catholics United, and Network, a Catholic social justice organization. Other sponsors included a number of national Protestant church bodies, the National Council of Churches, and several national Jewish, Islamic and interfaith organizations.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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