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Bishops' health care bulletin inserts go nationwide

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Image from the bishops' Web page www.usccb.org/healthcare

WASHINGTON -- The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has sent bulletin inserts to almost 19,000 parishes across the country in an effort to urge Catholics to prevent health care reform from being derailed by support for abortion funding.

"Health care reform should be about saving lives, not destroying them," the insert states. It urges readers to contact Senate leaders so they support efforts to "incorporate long-standing policies against abortion funding and in favor of conscience rights" in health reform legislation.

"If these serious concerns are not addressed, the final bill should be opposed," it adds.

The insert highlights an amendment sponsored by Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., which "addresses essential pro-life concerns on abortion funding and conscience rights."

"Help ensure that the rule for the bill allows a vote on the amendment," the insert states. "If these serious concerns are not addressed, the final bill should be opposed."

The insert also directs Catholics to the Web page www.usccb.org/healthcare.

Parishes also were receiving suggested pulpit announcements and petitions in support of this effort.

Bulletin inserts were distributed to dioceses Oct. 29, the day House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and other House leaders unveiled an $894 billion health care reform bill called the Affordable Health Care for America Act.

The inserts -- expected to be placed in parish bulletins in early November -- contain information about how Catholics can take specific action by writing, calling, faxing or e-mailing members of Congress to let them know health care reform must explicitly ban abortion coverage.

The House measure combines bills passed by three committees in July into one piece of legislation that members were to begin debating on the House floor in early November. Floor action on the U.S. Senate bill had

not yet been announced.

The U.S. bishops have criticized the Senate measure for not explicitly barring funding of abortion coverage. The House bill also does not resolve the issue of abortion coverage.

"The debate and decisions on health care reform are reaching decisive moments. We write ... to ask for your active and personal leadership to ensure that needed health care reform protects the life, dignity and health care of all," said the president of the USCCB and the chairmen of three bishops' committees in an Oct. 28 letter to their fellow bishops across the country.

The letter accompanied the bulletin inserts urging the bishops to promote the campaign in their dioceses.

It was signed by Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, president; Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, chairman of the Committee on Pro-life Activities; Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, chairman of the Committee on Migration; and Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

They thanked all of the bishops for their work so far to make Congress understand the bishops' "principles and priorities" for health care reform the Catholic Church has long supported.

"We now ask you to redouble your efforts to ensure that we speak clearly, effectively and together for health care reform that protects life and conscience and reaches out to the vulnerable and marginalized who need life-affirming health care the most," they wrote.

"The bishops want health care reform, but they recoil at any expansion of abortion," said Helen Osman, USCCB communications secretary, who helped organize the campaign. "Most Americans don't want to pay for other people's abortions via health care either.

"This impasse on the road to reform of health care can be broken if Congress writes in language that assures that the Hyde amendment law continues to guide U.S. federal spending policy," she said.

The Hyde amendment bars funding of abortion in the spending bills for the departments of Labor and Health and Human Services and in military hospitals, federal employees' health benefits, foreign assistance and other circumstances.

A USCCB release on the bulletin-insert campaign said that the Catholic bishops have a long history of support for health care reform "based on its teaching that health care is essential for human life and dignity and on its experience providing health care and assisting those without coverage."

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