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Bishops oppose Senate health reform bill

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Dec. 21, 2009

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., is trailed by reporters at the U.S. Capitol Dec. 19 in Washington. (CNS/Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- Although authentic reform of the nation's health system is "a public good, moral imperative and urgent national priority," the Senate version of health reform legislation "should not move forward in its current form," the heads of three committees of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said Dec. 19.

The comments came after the introduction of a 383-page manager's amendment incorporating some aspects of an amendment proposed by Sen. Robert Casey, D-Pa., to improve the bill on the issues of abortion and conscience rights.

In a Dec. 18 statement, Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, chairman of the USCCB Committee on Pro-Life Activities, had welcomed Casey's "good-faith effort" but said a "fundamental problem" remains that makes the bill morally unacceptable.

He said the bishops' conference would continue to oppose the Senate legislation "unless and until" it is amended to "comply with long-standing Hyde restrictions on federal funding of elective abortions and health plans that include them."

The Hyde amendment prohibits federal funding of abortion except in cases of rape, incest or threat to the woman's life.

Bishops William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., and John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, who chair the committees on Domestic Justice and Human Development and on Migration, respectively, joined Cardinal DiNardo in the Dec. 19 statement.

Although praising the manager's amendment for including Casey's expansion of adoption tax credits and assistance for pregnant women, the statement cited two remaining problems:

-- "It does not seem to allow purchasers who exercise freedom of choice or of conscience to 'opt out' of abortion coverage in federally subsidized health plans that include such coverage. Instead it will require purchasers of such plans to pay a distinct fee or surcharge which is extracted solely to help pay for other people's abortions.
-- "The government agency that currently manages health coverage for federal employees will promote and help

subsidize multi-state health plans that include elective abortions, contrary to longstanding law governing this agency."

The three chairmen said the bishops' conference would continue to study the implications of the lengthy manager's amendment "from the perspective of all the bishops' moral concerns -- protection of life and conscience, affordable access to health care and fairness to immigrants."

On abortion, the bishops' conference had backed a bipartisan amendment sponsored by Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., and others. Similar to a House-passed measure sponsored by Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., the amendment would have incorporated the Hyde amendment protections into the health reform bill.

When the Senate tabled Nelson's amendment in a 54-45 vote Dec. 8, Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, bishops' conference president, and the three chairmen called it "a grave mistake and a serious blow to genuine health reform."

Nelson joined with the 57 other Senate Democrats and two independents in voting Dec. 19 to end debate on the health reform legislation, ending a Republican filibuster.

Two other procedural votes -- each needing 60 votes -- were required in the Senate before a vote on final passage could take place. The final vote, requiring only a simple majority, was expected Dec. 24.

Several Nebraska religious leaders praised Nelson for supporting the Senate health reform bill.

"Your efforts ensure that we can move ahead with health care reform that protects the dignity of life at every stage and provides critical support for pregnant women and children," said a letter signed by five Catholic priests, a Sister of Mercy and leaders of Lutheran, African Methodist Episcopal, Disciples of Christ, Methodist, Episcopal and Jewish congregations.

"Your willingness to work to make health care more accessible and affordable shows a deep commitment to the moral and ethical principles of the common good," the letter added. "As Nebraskans we are both proud of and grateful for all your difficult work of negotiating pressure from both sides of this extremely important issue; we commend you for making the right decision."

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