

'No disagreement' between Catholic hospitals, bishops

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Dec. 28, 2009



A June 24 interfaith rally in support of universal health care in Washington. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

WASHINGTON -- Despite a New York Times report to the contrary, the Catholic Health Association and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops are working together to achieve health reform legislation that does not expand federal funding of abortion, according to the CHA president and CEO.

Sr. Carol Keehan, a Daughter of Charity, told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview Dec. 28 that her organization has never wavered in its commitment to health care that protects "from conception to natural death," as outlined in the CHA document, "Our Vision for U.S. Health Care."

She disputed a report in *The New York Times* Dec. 26 that a recent CHA statement on Senate negotiations over abortion funding in health reform legislation represented a split with the bishops.

"There is not a shred of disagreement between CHA and the bishops," Keehan said. "We believe there is a great possibility and probability that in conference committee we can work toward a solution that will prevent federal funding of abortion."

She said the CHA, which represents more than 600 Catholic hospitals in the U.S., "brings a lot of expertise with funding structures in the marketplace" to the debate and hopes to "bring that to bear" during the conference committee's work.

Shortly before the Senate approved its version of health reform legislation early Dec. 24, the chairmen of three USCCB committees said the bill should not be approved "without incorporating essential changes to ensure" that it "truly protects the life, dignity, consciences and health of all."

In a letter sent late Dec. 22, about 36 hours before the Senate's 60-39 vote along party lines, the USCCB leaders pledged continued efforts to incorporate needed changes during the work of the House-Senate conference committee.

"For many months, our bishops' conference has worked with members of Congress, the administration and others to fashion health care reform legislation that truly protects the life, dignity, health and consciences of all," said the letter signed by Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston and Bishops William F. Murphy of

Rockville Centre, N.Y., and John C. Wester of Salt Lake City.

The three chair the USCCB committees on Pro-Life Activities, on Domestic Justice and Human Development and on Migration, respectively.

"We regret to say that in all the areas of our moral concern, the Senate health care reform bill is deficient," the three chairmen added.

The bishops said their biggest problem with the Senate bill was its treatment of abortion funding, which "not only falls short of the House's standard but violates long-standing precedent in all other federal health programs."

In addition to not maintaining the legal status quo on abortion funding that has been supported by President Barack Obama and by the majority of Americans in many polls, the abortion provisions in the manager's amendment to the Senate bill would require purchasers of some health insurance plans "to pay for other people's abortions in a very direct and explicit way," the USCCB letter said.

"There is no provision for individuals to opt out of this abortion payment in federally subsidized plans, so people will be required by law to pay for other people's abortions," it added.

The Senate bill also fails to include provisions to prevent "discrimination against health care providers that decline involvement in abortion" and would not protect the rights of Catholic and other institutions "to provide and purchase health coverage consistent with their moral and religious convictions on other procedures," the chairmen said.

The letter also urged changes in the Senate bill's provisions barring undocumented immigrants from purchasing health insurance from an exchange with their own money and banning legal immigrants from federal health benefit programs for five years.

Keehan said *Times* reporter David D. Kirkpatrick based his Dec. 26 story on a Dec. 17 CHA statement that noted that CHA had not reviewed the language of various amendments on the table at the time but was "encouraged by recent deliberations and the outline" Sen. Robert Casey, D-Pa., was developing.

At that point, "I felt they were making progress and were getting where we needed to be," she said.

"I understand that it doesn't make a good story to say [CHA and the USCCB] are working together," Keehan added. "But it would have been an honest story."

In an earlier statement, DiNardo said the USCCB 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.

On abortion, the USCCB 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, USCCB president, and the three USCCB 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, cutting off a Republican filibuster.

Nelson told the *Lincoln Journal Star* Dec. 23 that he "did not compromise my pro-life principles" by supporting the Senate language on abortion funding. "We just found different language that will work," he added.

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