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Bishops won't support repeal of health care bill

by Daniel Burke by Religion News Service

WASHINGTON -- The U.S. Catholic bishops will not join efforts to repeal the new health care law, even though they staunchly opposed the bill last year after concluding it permits federally funded abortions.

Instead of pushing repeal, the bishops said Tuesday (Jan. 18) they will devote their energy to correcting serious moral problems in the current law, according to a letter sent to Capitol Hill from Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, Bishop Stephen Blaire, and Archbishop Jose Gomez, who all chair political committees at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, president of the USCCB, echoed that message in a separate letter to all 535 members of Congress outlining the bishops' top political priorities.

By not supporting House Republicans' campaign to repeal the health care law, the bishops averted another clash with Catholic health care workers and nuns, who had bucked the hierarchy last year by publicly backing the bill.

In his farewell address as president of the USCCB last year, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago lamented the wound to the church's unity caused by last year's debate.

The Catholic Health Association and Network, a social justice lobby run by Catholic sisters, both said they continue to support the Affordable Care Act that was passed last year.

"While no one piece of legislation is perfect," said Sister Carol Keehan, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association, "we believe many of the (bill's) provisions to strengthen our health care system and expand access and coverage to millions of families are essential and should remain law."

The House began debate on the repeal on Tuesday; the GOP-led campaign will likely end there as well, as

neither the Democratic-controlled Senate nor President Obama support rescinding the law.

The bishops urged Congress to take up two bills introduced last year that they believe would ensure the new health care bill maintains longstanding prohibitions on federal funding of abortion and bolsters conscience rights for health care workers. Religious progressives and the Obama administration have said the new law and a related executive order signed by the president last year already do so.

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