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Debt debate brings calls for preserving safety net

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | Jul. 15, 2011

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- As congressional and administration negotiators played out their game of debt-limit stare-down, advocates for and recipients of federally funded services for the poor, elderly and disabled began raising their voices in protest of proposals to solve the fiscal crisis by cutting social service budgets.

Sarah Watkins, a member of a disabilities activist organization called Adapt, said that the help she gets through Medicaid -- one of the programs named often as likely to face major budget cuts -- makes the difference between whether she is able to live independently or must be institutionalized.

Watkins was among hundreds of participants in a July 12 rally in the Dirksen Senate Office Building, where users of Medicaid services, providers of those services and other advocates for the poor held signs touting "Medicaid Matters" for seniors, people of faith, children, America and parents.

Arlene Holt Baker, executive vice president of the AFL-CIO, held up a petition being delivered to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid urging that Medicaid "not be on the chopping block." She said Congress needs to focus on creating jobs instead of looking for ways to meet the demands of "those with yachts and corporate jets."

She spoke as part of the "Care Congress," a national town hall meeting on care in America which launched a campaign called Caring Across Generations.

The government must formally raise its debt limit by Aug. 2 or the country will face unknown, but potentially dire, financial circumstances. Government and private economists warn that if the United States fails to raise the limit on how much it can borrow and stops paying its bills, the economy will face a dramatic crisis.

As the Associated Press explains: "Democratic and Republican congressional leaders agree on the need to avert that outcome, but that hasn't been enough to get Republicans to agree to the tax hikes on corporations and the wealthy sought by Obama -- or to convince Obama and Democrats to sign on to the steep entitlement cuts without new revenue that Republicans favor."

In a July 15 news conference, President Barack Obama said while cuts to social safety net programs are on the negotiating table, he's unwilling to cut services to existing recipients but that he would consider steps such as raising the amount wealthier seniors have to pay for their Medicare services.

Among participants at the Care Congress event who were giving their personal stories of reliance on Medicaid, Watkins described the many types of care she gets daily.

Aides come to her home for six hours a day, she said, beginning early in the morning, "to help me get out of bed, dress, bathe, prepare meals, get everything I need done so I can get on with my day." Later, they return to help her get ready for bed.

"Without these 40 hours a week of Medicaid-funded services, I wouldn't be living on my own. I wouldn't be

volunteering in my community. I wouldn't be working full time and I wouldn't be paying taxes," said Watkins, who uses a motorized wheelchair. "I would be in a nursing home, unnecessarily using additional public dollars for care that I do not need and that I do not want."

Watkins said she has never been institutionalized, thanks to the Medicaid services she receives, but she lives with the reality that "my freedom is at risk" as long as her caregivers and the care she receives are seen as expendable by those who are looking for places to cut the budget. "Now is the time for Congress to act responsibly," she said, by maintaining Medicaid home and community services.

The organizers said 7.6 million people receive in-home and community-based long-term care. They noted in a press release that by 2030, an estimated 20 percent of the U.S. population will be made up of people over age 65, adding to the need for such services.

The rally was among numerous efforts being waged to try to convince negotiators that cutting funding for Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare will have dramatic and disastrous effects on the poor people who rely on those programs.

A July 13 letter to Obama and members of Congress from Catholic leaders said they are deeply concerned that a budget compromise will be struck "that sacrifices the poor and most vulnerable on the altar of deficit reduction. Such a solution would be flawed public policy and a moral failure."

The letter was signed by Catholic religious and lay leaders, including Sister Simone Campbell, a Sister of Social Service and executive director of Network, a social justice lobby; Jesuit Father T. Michael McNulty, justice and peace director for the Conference of Major Superiors of Men; Franciscan Sister Marie Lucey, associate director for social mission at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious; the five-woman leadership team of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas; and Jesuit Father James Hug, president of the Center of Concern.

Other signers were theologians and professors from across the country in fields such as policy research, Christian ethics and social service.

"We must address our nation's fiscal crisis," they wrote. "The crisis is the result of unsustainable tax cuts, deficit funding of two wars, and the financial crisis. In this context it is gravely immoral to balance the budget on the backs of the middle class and poor by slashing Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security and other bedrock safety-net programs that support pregnant mothers and infants."

"In years past, political leaders from both parties have reduced the deficit without hurting our must vulnerable neighbors and increasing poverty," the Catholic leaders said. "We must do so again."

A similar letter signed by more than 5,000 religious leaders noted that their congregations are filled with people who need and benefit from federally funded programs for the poor.

"We work, pray, and do whatever we can to remain faithful to the responsibility of every Christian to help the poor," they wrote. "Still, we can't meet the crushing needs by ourselves. We do our best to feed the hungry, but charitable nutrition programs only make up 6 percent of total feeding programs in the country while the government makes up 94 percent," the letter said.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance program, the Women, Infants and Children program as well as "Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, Head Start, Pell Grants and Community Development Block Grants aren't just abstract concepts to us; they serve the same people we serve," the religious leaders continued.

"There are changes that can be made or efficiencies that can be found, but every day we see what government

can do," they said. "There is more need today than churches can meet by themselves."

The signers were part of the Circle of Protection, a promise by religious leaders to speak for the voiceless poor in budget debates.

"As Christians, we believe the moral measure of the debate is how the most poor and vulnerable people fare. We look at every budget proposal from the bottom up--how it treats those Jesus called 'the least of these' (Matthew 25:45). They do not have powerful lobbies, but they have the most compelling claim on our consciences and common resources."

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