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Pennsylvania Senate approves abortion opt-out for federal exchanges

Matthew Gambino Catholic News Service | Jun. 10, 2013
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The Pennsylvania Senate passed a bill June 5 that prohibits taxpayer funding of abortions in the federal health care exchanges.

Gov. Tom Corbett has promised to sign the bill, which passed in the state House of Representatives in April.

Corbett announced last December that Pennsylvania would not set up a state health exchange under the 2010 health care reform law, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Because of that, Pennsylvanians choosing health care as required by the law may choose from the federal exchanges, which include abortion coverage.

The law allowed for state legislation to ban abortion funding in the federal exchanges for residents of the state, which the bill, H.B. 818, accomplished. The new state bill also prohibits funding for abortion in private health care plans that include a federal subsidy.

Pro-life advocates were pleased with the Senate's passage of the bill.

Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia praised passage of the bill.

"Pennsylvanians can be pleased that House Bill 818 has passed the full state Senate and is headed to Governor Corbett for signature," he said. "The legislation wisely prohibits taxpayer-funded insurance plans created by the federal health care exchange from covering elective abortions.

"Abortion is violence of the most intimate sort. It has nothing to do with sound medical care, and people shouldn't be forced to fund it. I'm grateful to the legislators who had the courage to take a stand for the dignity of human life and to all who encouraged them to do so.

"Much work remains to be done," the archbishop said. "The effort to protect and promote a culture of life will be ongoing. May God deepen our commitment to advancing the dignity of women and their children -- born and unborn."

"The Senate took a stand in support of the dignity of human life," said Robert O'Hara, executive director of the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference. "I applaud the efforts of the sponsors of this legislation. ... I also appreciate the senators who voted across party lines in support of life."

Two amendments were attached to the bill that O'Hara said would have weakened it. The amendments were narrowly defeated.

The overall bill passed by a vote of 31-19, and now goes to the governor's desk to be enacted. Among the 18 senators represented in the archdiocese of Philadelphia, the vote fell strictly along partisan lines -- nine Republicans voting for and nine Democrats against.

Edel Finnegan, executive director of the Pro-Life Union of Greater Philadelphia, was gratified by passage of the bill because it means "taxpayers are not forced to pay for abortions" under the health care law, she said.

Finnegan praised the "joint, unified efforts" of the Catholic conference and the Philadelphia Archdiocese's Office for Life, Family and Laity "and pro-lifers in the greater Philadelphia region that helped pass this critical bill."

She believed the health care reform law and the state and federal exchanges it calls for are confusing to people, but "even people who are marginally pro-life, they don't want to pay for abortions," she said.

And although people might not want to get active politically, the efforts of the state Catholic conference and the Philadelphia archdiocese made it easier for people to stay informed. She praised the use of frequent email messages that made it easy to contact a legislator to urge passage of the bill or to offer thanks for an affirmative vote.

"When the dignity of the unborn child and the damage of abortion causes us to act, it's a good thing," Finnegan said. "When we are working to advocate for the dignity of the human person, we are building a culture of life."

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