

Challenges ahead for Catholic health care, Keehan says

Colleen Dunne | Oct. 17, 2013
Kansas City, Mo.

Daughters of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, who has been involved in negotiations with government and church leaders about the new health care law, said Wednesday that Catholic providers face important challenges as they seek to offer mission-driven services in a rapidly changing health care structure.

Keehan, president of the Catholic Health Association since 2005, has more than 35 years of experience working in Catholic health care. She spoke before a crowded auditorium at Jesuit-run Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Mo.

"Tonight I come to you as someone who believes Catholic health care is a treasure for the United States," she said. "We have a stellar history in this nation from the beginnings with the Ursuline community -- and the first Catholic hospital in the United States opened in New Orleans -- to what goes on in our Catholic hospitals to this very day."

Catholic health care providers employ more than 800,000 people, has 19 million emergency room visits every year and more than 100 million visits for outpatient care, she said. There are about 630 Catholic hospitals in the United States and 1,600 Catholic continuing care facilities, she said.

Keehan said the challenges facing those hospitals and other care centers include rising costs, implementing the law known as the Affordable Care Act, maintaining the mission Catholic services, changes in science and technology, and the freedom to care for the poor and most vulnerable. Keehan also touched on the division in the church that has been fueled by the new law.

"Basically, the church's teachings on the dignity of persons and what that means in a social, economic and health care context has been invaluable to this country," she said. "However, there have been at times significant distortions of the church's teaching and in my judgment at times these have been as destructive and problematic as rejections of the church's teaching."

Keehan laid out the complexities of concerns of Catholics leaders of what the Affordable Care Act will require companies to cover and what conversations are happening among Catholic schools, parishes, hospitals and universities to overcome these challenges.

Comparing the trials of passing the current bill to those of the Medicare bill of the early 1960s, Keehan said, "Let me be really clear that the Affordable Care Act is not the bill I would have passed. I doubt that it is the bill that any member of Congress or the White House staff would have passed. It is the bill we could get passed."

As an underlying theme, she also focused on preparing laymen and women to effectively lead health care systems to meet these challenges.

"Sisters spent an enormous amount of time and resources in educational programs, mentoring programs and

development programs to prepare management staff, governance members and now sponsors for Catholic health care," she said. "Laypeople are accepting the responsibility for a ministry of the church and that is a significant responsibility to take on."

She said in 1968, there were 770 religious CEOs and only 26 lay CEOs running Catholic hospitals. Today, four religious CEOs and 626 lay CEOs lead those institutions.

Keehan ended her talk by saying, "It is important to remember that as we face these challenges, the option to give up is not possible and the care of the sick is a Gospel mandate."

"A church that does not care for the sick, promote health and show special concern for the vulnerable would have a hard time claiming to follow the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

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