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Health care must protect everyone, 'born and unborn,' say bishops

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Richmond, Va.

Virginia's two Catholic bishops have urged the state's lawmakers to enact health care reforms "that cover everyone and protect everyone, born and unborn."

A statement issued Friday by Bishops Francis DiLorenzo of Richmond and Paul Loverde of Arlington was prompted by the Virginia General Assembly's ongoing debate over health care reform during a special session on the state budget.

According to the Associated Press, one of the issues facing law makers is what to do about Medicaid expansion, which has resulted in an impasse, delaying passage of a state budget.

Democratic Gov. Terry McAuliffe and the Democrat majority in the Senate, with the support of three Republicans, want to expand Medicaid eligibility to about 400,000 low-income residents. House Republicans oppose the Senate's proposal.

"The current debate over health care and the state budget is, at its heart, about Virginia's poorest and most vulnerable people," DiLorenzo and Loverde said. "For this reason, it is one we bishops care about deeply, and are actively engaged in through our Virginia Catholic Conference."

The conference, which released their statement, is the public policy arm of the Catholic church in Virginia.

The bishops said their advocacy on the issue of health care "is informed by the church's teaching that, first, everyone has the right to life, and second, health care is a right -- not a privilege -- that flows from the right to life itself.

"This understanding transcends the categories of left and right, liberal and conservative, Democrat and Republican," they said. "It applies to all members of the human family -- born and unborn, affluent and poor, insured and uninsured."

To reach the goal of covering and protecting everyone with decent health care, the bishops described "two gaps" they said must be closed.

First, is the "'coverage gap' that prevents nearly 400,000 Virginians who earn below 133 percent of the federal poverty level ... from having any realistic access to health insurance," the bishops said. For 2014, that poverty threshold for an individual is $15,521, and for a family of four, $31,721.

"These uninsured residents make too much to qualify for Virginia's Medicaid program, which even excludes most people living below the poverty level. Yet, these men and women earn too little to afford health insurance. They are literally one health emergency away from financial ruin," they said.

The current Senate budget proposal would close the gap, they said, and help those "forced to choose between

taking their child to the doctor and paying rent, or rush(ing) to emergency rooms when untreated chronic conditions become catastrophic."

They described the second gap as the "Hyde conformity gap," which "endangers unborn children, who are voiceless in this health reform debate and must not be forgotten."

"Abortion is the antithesis of health care," DiLorenzo and Loverde said. "It does not heal lives; it ends them. Banning taxpayer-funded abortions to the fullest extent possible must, therefore, also be part of any health care reform effort in Virginia. Each time health care and the state budget are debated, we will press to save as many unborn lives as we can, as we have consistently done in the past."

They were referring to the Hyde amendment, the long-standing federal statutory restriction that that says federal funds cannot be used for abortion services, except in cases of rape or incest, or when the life of the mother is endangered.

The bishops said that for Medicaid-eligible pregnant women, Virginia currently funds abortions in four cases. Three of them are the Hyde amendment exceptions.

But the fourth case, which they said Virginia "entirely with state money, is abortion because of a diagnosis of an unborn child's 'physical deformity' or 'mental deficiency.'"

"Virginia suffers from a 'Hyde conformity gap,' therefore, by going beyond the federal Hyde standard and spending our state tax dollars to abort children who might be born with disabilities," the bishops said. "Most federal programs do not fund these abortions; most states do not fund these abortions; and even the new federal exchange operating in Virginia doesn't cover them."

They urged state lawmakers to close the gap "by banning state funding of these 'physical deformity/mental deficiency' abortions," adding that the House of Delegates budget proposal would do so.

"Virginia should stop spending our money on abortions it can choose not to fund," the bishops said. "Likewise, Virginia should start accepting federal money that can provide nearly 400,000 of its poorest residents the health insurance they currently lack and desperately need."

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