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Life Issues Forum

Lines in the Sand By Tom Grenchik

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As members of Congress head home for their August recess, we now have a better picture of where everyone stands on health care reform. While the U.S. bishops support genuine health care reform, there is a clear line in the sand between our bishops and some congressional leaders.

On July 17, Bishop William Murphy, Chairman of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, wrote to Congress saying: "The USCCB looks forward to working with you to reform health care successfully in a manner that offers accessible, affordable and quality health care that protects and respects the life and dignity of all people from conception until natural death." Then Bishop Murphy drew a line, declaring that "no health care reform plan should compel us or others to pay for the destruction of human life, whether through government funding or mandatory coverage of abortion."

Some seemed surprised at this, since abortion was not specifically mentioned in draft health care bills until recently. Those with longer memories may recall that the Medicaid statute doesn't mention abortion either, but it was funding 300,000 abortions a year in the 1970s until we put a stop to that with the Hyde amendment. In any case, numerous amendments to keep abortion out of health care reform have been defeated in committee, and it is now apparent that some leaders have every intention of threatening the health care reform process by forcing Americans to accept abortion mandates and/or fund unlimited abortion in their health coverage.

Cardinal Justin Rigali, Chairman of the U.S. Catholic bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, followed up with a July 29 letter to the House Energy and Commerce Committee, declaring that "much-needed reform must not become a vehicle for promoting an 'abortion rights' agenda or reversing longstanding current policies against federal abortion mandates and funding." The Cardinal urged Committee members to preserve longstanding federal policies that prevent government promotion of abortion and respect conscience rights.

But Bishop Murphy and Cardinal Rigali are not the only ones drawing lines. Millions upon millions of American Catholics are with them. Earlier this year, dioceses across the country broke all previous records by ordering more than 34 million postcards so their parishioners could urge Congress to "retain laws against federal funding and promotion of abortion." Now that members of Congress are heading home, they need to be reminded of this message at the local level, in the context of health care reform.

As Congress takes its vacation, various proposals have been left behind. These proposals need to be examined to see how well they provide accessible, affordable and quality health care and how they impact immigrants and the poor. But one thing is certain. The bills approved so far by House and Senate committees include mandated abortion coverage and abortion funding, and that is a line we can never cross.

Now is the time to take action. Contact congressional members through e-mail, phone calls or FAX letters. E-mails can be sent by visiting www.usccb.org/prolife and clicking on the Health Care Reform Action Alert. You can also call the U.S. Capitol switchboard at 202-224-3121, attend town hall meetings in your local district, or call the local offices of your representative and senators. Full contact info can be found on Members' web sites at www.house.gov and www.senate.gov.

The message is simple: "Support genuine health care reform that respects the life and dignity of all. A fair and just health care reform bill must exclude mandated coverage for abortion, and uphold longstanding laws that restrict abortion funding and protect conscience rights."

Tom Grenchik is Executive Director of the Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Go to www.usccb.org/prolife to learn more about the bishops' pro-life activities.