

Bishops Say Health Reform Should Include All Immigrants Legal or Not

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www.catholicnews.com

September 22, 2009

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Though Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., concedes there's no political will in Washington to include illegal immigrants in health care reform, he believes it's the country's moral obligation to ensure that everyone in the nation receives proper medical care.

That includes those who enter the country illegally, he told Catholic News Service in mid-September.

"I agree that there is a special problem with those who have entered here without the permission of the United States, and that has to be looked at," said Bishop Murphy, who chairs the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development. "But that's a problem unto itself."

Most U.S. Catholic bishops who have spoken publicly about health care reform have expressed the opinion that one of the richest countries in the world should find a way to guarantee that everyone within its borders has access to medical care, from conception to natural death.

Several Hispanic bishops met with members of the House and Senate Sept. 17 to convey their concern that immigrants -- legal and illegal -- might be left out of health reform.

Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, Calif., said that in addition to President Barack Obama's pledge not to provide government-funded care to people in the country illegally, concerns have been expressed that even legal immigrants might be left out of the system.

Bishop Soto said the exclusion of government-supported insurance for undocumented immigrants is an issue with which the bishops might disagree, but could concede as a political necessity. But the legislation "has to include at a minimum some kind of safety net for the undocumented," particularly if the goal of a nationwide health care reform plan is to improve the overall health of society, he said.

"We realize it's a very contentious issue," Bishop Soto said. "But there has to be some kind of a safety net."

If undocumented immigrants cannot participate in health insurance, he added, "they will end up in emergency rooms."

Bishop Murphy said Catholic hospitals will not turn illegal immigrants away if they don't have medical insurance, but he believes it will be more cost-effective if the undocumented are given an opportunity to buy into an affordable health insurance plan.

On "the issue of health care, if it leaves out immigrants, it is doing what some people want it to do in terms of the unborn," he said.

"How can we say that we're a country of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all who come to our shores if we say, 'except the unborn.' Or, if we say, 'except the handicapped.' Or, if we say, 'except the new person,'" Bishop Murphy said. "Then we have not lived up to the high ideal of our country. And we have introduced a sense of injustice into a plan that should be just for all."

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