

DIOCESAN NEWS

Contraception coverage still on hold

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

No news may mean good news for Catholics fighting the New York state Legislature's efforts to force church institutions to provide employee health-insurance benefits that conflict with church teaching against abortion and contraception.

That's the view of Dennis Poust, associate director for communications of the New York State Catholic Conference in Albany. Poust noted that the Legislature's two chambers have yet to agree on what kind of bill mandating health-insurance benefits should become the law of the state. But both chambers' bills are direct attacks on the Catholic Church, he and the New York bishops have said repeatedly in the past two months.

Poust offered his views during the church's annual Public Policy Forum, which took place at the state Capitol in Albany March 12. More than 850 representatives of Catholic institutions traveled to the Capitol to buttonhole legislators on issues of concern to the church, including welfare reform, drug laws and publicly funded transportation for Catholic school students. Among those representatives were 85 from the Diocese of Rochester.

The Legislature's two houses have been

unable to forge a compromise on legislation that would force employers to include coverage for contraception and abortifacients in their group health-insurance plans, Poust said. Titled the Women's Health and Wellness Act, the Senate's version of the bill contains a "conscience clause" that would allow certain employers, defined by the state as "religious," to opt out of offering coverage they considered immoral. The legislation also contains provisions calling for group health plans to cover the costs of mammograms and various other medical services for women.

The state's bishops have emphasized publicly that they support the act's health-insurance mandates, except for the ones covering contraception and abortifacients. Additionally, they have said the Senate's conscience clause is too narrow to apply to the church's hospitals, schools and social service agencies. The Senate bill would only exempt parishes and diocesan offices from offering coverage that contradicts church teaching, the bishops have said. The Assembly bill, on the other hand, doesn't even have a conscience clause.

Although they had come to lobby legislators and the governor on a number of issues, fighting the contraception bill overshadowed the day, much to the chagrin of Catholic leaders, including Cardinal Edward Egan of the Archdiocese of New York City.

"This legislative session, the Catholic Church once again finds itself under siege in the state Legislature," the cardinal said at a morning press conference. The church in New York has always operated its social-service agencies and hospitals in compliance with its teachings, and had no problems with the state until recent years, he

said.

"Since our legislative leaders apparently no longer share that understanding, I must be clear and unambiguous," he said. "We cannot and will not compromise on issues of faith. And we will not be daunted by abortion and contraception extremists whose aggressive agenda includes putting the Catholic Church out of the business of providing health care and social services in New York."

During the day, the cardinal met with the state's three top political leaders, Gov. George Pataki, Senate Majority Leader Joseph L. Bruno and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver.

"They were cordial meetings, but little progress was made," Poust said.

Both Bruno and Silver have publicly courted the state's pro-choice activists, who have appeared with them at press conferences on their respective houses' bills. Pataki, meanwhile, has indicated he'll sign any women's health bill that comes his way, with or without a conscience clause, Poust said.

The bishops have said if either version of the women's health act becomes law, they may have to consider closing Catholic hospitals, schools and social service agencies rather than operate them in violation of church teaching. And Poust said neither house has considered creating separate bills that would leave out contraceptive coverage.

"The contraception-coverage supporters would never allow for it to be separated out," he said. "They know that they couldn't pass (such coverage) on its own."

Bishop Howard Hubbard of the Diocese of Albany also criticized the Legislature's efforts to mandate contraceptive coverage, and highlighted a number of other areas of



Chris Sheridan
New York Cardinal Edward Egan chats with Governor George Pataki during the March 12 Public Policy Forum.

church concern.

For example, he said, the church wants the state government to support Catholic school parents through various measures. Among them are increased state aid to fund academic services state law requires Catholic schools to provide students. He noted that the church supports the Unborn Victims of Violence Act, which would allow prosecutors to charge assailants for a second crime when an unborn child is injured or killed in the commission of a crime against his or her mother. The church also supports increased funding for people moving from welfare to work, and for affordable housing initiatives.

Bishop Hubbard also said the church wants increased salaries for community mental-health workers, and increased funding for treatment of and assistance to people with HIV and AIDS. He also asked the state to do more to address the shortage of home-health-care aides, and to help rural citizens in obtaining jobs, housing and social services.

Note to readers

Due to cataract surgery, Bishop Matthew H. Clark does not have an "Along the Way" column for this issue. He is recovering well and sends thanks for prayers on his behalf.

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