

House defeats hospital-reporting bill

Patricia Zapor/CNS

WASHINGTON — A bill that would have required hospitals to report illegal immigrant patients to the federal government was soundly defeated by the House May 18 in a 331-88 vote.

The bill, H.R. 3722, would have required hospitals to ask patients about their immigration status, take fingerprints or photographs and report those who might be in the country illegally to federal authorities for possible deportation. It also would have required hospitals to bill employers of illegal immigrants for their medical expenses.

The requirements would have applied to hospitals that hoped to be reimbursed by the federal government for the unpaid costs of treating uninsured illegal immigrants.

The proposal was criticized by a number of immigrant advocacy groups, business owners and hospital organizations, including the Catholic Health Association. They said it would turn hospital employees into de facto Border Patrol agents, while also risking public health because illegal immigrants would be afraid to seek medical treatment.

In a letter to members of Congress urging them to oppose the legislation, the Catholic Health Association and six other hospital groups said the bill "would virtually ensure that illegal immigrants will avoid getting the appropriate and timely life-saving health care they need, when they need it."

Its sponsor, Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., said in a floor statement when he introduced the bill in January that it would help address "the greatest threat to the American people ... the still uncontrolled flood of illegal immigration into our society."

He said bringing the bill to a vote was promised him by the House leadership in return for his vote on a Medicare bill that included a provision to reimburse hospitals for the cost of treating uninsured illegal immigrants. As of May 11, his bill had just one co-sponsor, Rep. Doug

Bereuter, R-Neb.

The bill has no counterpart measure in the Senate, according to participants in a May 10 teleconference sponsored by the National Council of La Raza.

In a debate on the House floor, Rep. Hilda Solis, D-Calif., said the problems with health-care delivery in the United States should not be blamed on one group of people, when 43 million people have no health insurance.

"We cannot let this bill be the message we send to the American people about what we think about immigrants, hardworking, tax-paying immigrants who come to this country for a better life," said Solis. "In fact, the average immigrant contributes about \$1,800 more in taxes

annually than he or she receives in any form of benefit, because they do not collect. We can do better than this bill."

Rohrabacher called it a travesty that the federal government would consider picking up the cost of caring for illegal immigrants, but not for U.S. citizens.

Millions of poor U.S. citizens do receive medical care at federal expense through Medicaid. Under current law, hospitals are required to treat patients without regard for their ability to pay. States cover some of those expenses.

Hospitals are prohibited from inquiring about patients' immigration status.

Rohrabacher also said the current policy sends the wrong signal to oth-

er countries: "Let us make sure that everybody in the world knows that if they can get their kids to the United States we will take care of them, and see how many diseases we are going to get.

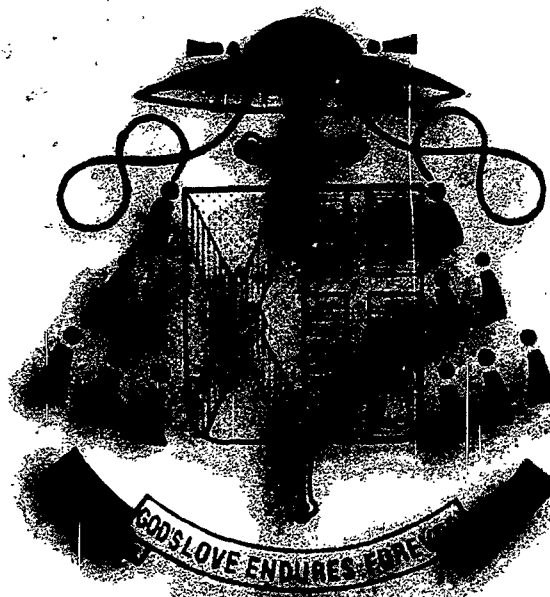
"That is what is happening in California right now. Diseases are beginning to materialize because people have brought their children and brought their seniors as well to come to the United States to be treated," he said.

Rep. Lloyd Doggett, D-Texas, said the bill would have demanded medical personnel take an inappropriate role with patients. "When a doctor asks the nurse for a patient's vital signs, it ought not to mean fingerprints and a visa entry number," he said.

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