

Valley faith group turns attention to Capitol Hill

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BEE WASHINGTON
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WASHINGTON — Tracye Bishop already navigates state and local government pretty well.

She has to, as executive director of the Modesto-based Congregations Building Community. The nonprofit group promotes affordable housing and health care, among other issues in which state and local authorities play a crucial role.

Now, Bishop is pursuing what she describes as "the first federal link" for her organization. She and her allies are starting to explicitly

rally support from Capitol Hill, whose potential to help or hinder has become apparent to Bishop.

"It became, actually, crystal clear," Bishop said.

In particular, Congregations Building Community wants local lawmakers to back a multibillion-dollar Medicare reimbursement bill. The group also wants additional federal assistance for local health clinics, which can require some delicate negotiations with existing clinics.

Local lawmakers are offering a sympathetic ear and, in some cases, expressions of support. But please see **GROUP**, Page B2

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with a federal deficit exceeding \$400 billion, and with the Republican-controlled Congress tightening budgets outside of defense spending, translating sympathy into action can also defy easy solution.

"It's a very idealistic agenda," said Bret Ladine, press secretary for Merced Democrat Dennis Cardoza. "In the current fiscal and political climate, it can be difficult."

All of which poses fresh challenges for Bishop, an experienced interfaith organizer who described herself as being in her early 30s. "You have to be very conscientious and policy savvy," Bishop said.

The Modesto group began operations in 2001, as part of the 3-decade-old PICO National Network. Founded by a Jesuit priest in Oakland and formerly called the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations, the national group receives funding from

the likes of Ben & Jerry's and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

There are now about 50 affiliated federations, including the Stanislaus County Congregations Building Community, Fresno-based Faith in Community and Stockton-based People and Congregations Together. The Stanislaus County group encompasses more than a dozen congregations.

"Mostly what we deal with is very specific local issues, where we would go to the board of supervisors or the mayor," said the Rev. Wayne Bridegroom, pastor of Central Baptist Church in Modesto. "But with the problems of health care, there is only so much that can be done at the local level."

Bridegroom added that the congregational group is "very specifically nonpartisan," with allegiance more to the Scriptures than to a particular party's platform. For instance, the Stanislaus County and Stockton

groups in October invited Cardoza and Tracye Republican Richard Pombo to hear the health-care pitch.

Pombo declined, citing campaign obligations; he was helping the national GOP reelection effort. Bridegroom and others subsequently sent Pombo cards saying they missed him. Cardoza attended and committed himself to co-sponsoring legislation providing greater Medicare reimbursement.

Congregations Building Community also is seeking support for securing additional federal health-care assistance. This would come through designation of new Federally Qualified Health Centers in Stanislaus County.

The federal recognition provides new opportunities for clinics typically serving low-income families. The clinics enjoy enhanced Medicare and Medicaid reimburse-

ment, additional protection against lawsuits, access to lower-cost prescription drugs and more. The Merced-based Golden Valley Health Center, with its 19 locations through Merced and Stanislaus counties, already has that designation.

Though the final decision is up to the federal Department of Health and Human Services, Bishop noted that pre-existing Federally Qualified Health Centers can have a say as well. She said local lawmakers could help work this out.

"Because we are federal entities, we really should collaborate," said Scott Penner, a spokesman for Golden Valley. He added, though, that he was unfamiliar with the details of Congregation Building Community's specific proposal.

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