News
Social Justice

Sisters on the grounds of the U.S. Capitol extend their hands June 25, 2025, as they pray over letters sent to lawmakers opposing a bill that they say will hurt the poor in their communities. A group of about 200 Catholic women religious and their supporters attended the Sisters Speak Out event in Washington, even as temperatures reached almost 100 degrees. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

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## Join the Conversation

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As lawmakers consider a range of drastic cuts in aid to the poor in President Donald Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act, Catholic sisters and their supporters from around the country showed up close to their doorstep June 24 to speak against it.

"The 'big beautiful bill' is not beautiful. It is harmful. It is unjust and it goes against everything we believe in as Catholic women religious," St. Joseph Sr. Karen Burke said to the public. "Let's be honest about what's happening."

Sisters specifically objected to provisions in H.R. 1, as the bill also is known, targeting some $1 trillion in cuts to Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for low-income families. The bill aims to extend more than $4 trillion in tax cuts. It would also boost spending for border security and defense, while demanding that those who receive Medicaid work a certain number of hours to receive benefits.

"We know that this bill will take food from the hungry, care from the sick, and hope from the poor so that the rich can get richer," Burke said. "As women of faith, we must speak clearly: This is not just policy. It is morally wrong."

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Burke represented one of 56 religious congregations who joined the Washington event called Sisters Speak Out. On the grounds of the U.S. Capitol, a crowd of about 200 urged the Senate, which is considering the bill this week, to reject the cuts sisters say will hurt the country's most vulnerable.

Though the bill has faced obstacles, it passed the House of Representatives May 22, and Trump is pushing senators to "GET THE DEAL DONE THIS WEEK" and pass it before July 4, writing on Truth Social, "NO ONE GOES ON VACATION UNTIL IT'S DONE."

With rosaries in hand, sisters and supporters — who traveled to Washington, D.C., from Indiana, California, Texas, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Missouri and all points in between — prayed on the grounds of the Capitol for a different outcome, undeterred by temperatures that reached almost 100 degrees during the two-hour event. Older sisters toughed it out in the heat, with one saying that if it was uncomfortable, life was much harder for the poor they were there to defend.

Mercy Sr. Mary Haddad, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association of the United States, said, "Even this heat cannot suppress our voices."

Mercy Sr. Mary Haddad, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association of the United States, talks about adverse effects for the poor June 24, 2025, at the U.S. Capitol in Washington. Haddad joined a group of some 200 sisters and supporters speaking out against a bill lawmakers are considering, one that sisters fear would gut social safety net programs for the poor to extend tax breaks for the rich. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Some sisters used those voices to speak against any increase in immigration enforcement spending, on a day when CBS reported that the Trump administration set a record for detentions, holding 59,000 people — almost half of them without a criminal record — at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facilities.

Sisters spoke of witnessing ICE agents snatch away their neighbors, of watching families shattered, and of the increase in fear overtaking the communities they serve. Immigration enforcement funding in the bill would only add to that misery, they said.

"If we don't stand up and speak out, and say no to [the bill], we are condemning these sisters and brothers in our midst to torn-apart families and even death for many of them," Franciscan Sr. Noella Poinsette said.

Haddad spoke of the bill's threats to the health and well-being of vulnerable families, and also to Catholic health care providers and others who serve them. Sisters long have been part of the country's history in providing and advocating for the health of the poor, and some of the bill's provisions are a threat to that, she said.

"We are at an inflection point," she said. "The moral voices of women religious must ring out. ... Our work is not over."

Notre Dame de Namur Sr. Patricia Chappell, former executive director of Pax Christi USA, said the sisters present aren't just sisters to one another, but to the millions who stand to be affected adversely by the bill.

Catholic sisters and supporters listen to a speaker June 25, 2025, on the grounds of the U.S. Capitol, where women religious voiced worries over the Big Beautiful Bill Act lawmakers are weighing. More than 200 women religious and supporters from around the country turned out to oppose it, saying it will be detrimental to the poor. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"These families, these are our brothers and sisters," and it is for them that sisters need to speak out, she said, for their lack of access to food, for their lack of access to education and other social benefits they deserve, no matter who they are because they, too, are children of God.

She implored women religious not to be afraid to speak out for fear of losing tax-exempt status and to think of their founders and foundresses who weren't afraid to challenge bishops, presidents and popes.

"What will be our continuing response?" she asked. "Will we have the courage to speak out?"

Organizers said the coalition of Catholic sisters who gathered in Washington represents 17,800 sisters in 37 states and 11 countries. Twenty-one similar events were scheduled to take part throughout the country.

Burke, of the Sisters of St. Joseph, urged lawmakers to listen to them, not just as Catholic sisters but as people committed to the Gospel.

"We must do everything we can to stop this," she said. "And if we cannot stop this, then we have to minimize the harm it causes. This is not just about politics. This is about people and it is about the values that we live by, the values that we have professed our lives to."

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