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WASHINGTON (ABP)-Disputes over the minimum wage and other contentious election-year issues have stalled congressional reauthorization of a welfare reform program that includes funds for religious charities.

The dispute killed, for the time being, the Personal Responsibility and Individual Development for Everyone (PRIDE) Act.

Most congressional observers believe the bill won't come up again until after the November elections. The bill would be the first congressional reauthorization of the federal welfare-reform program first passed in 1996.

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That legislation included provisions for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program that explicitly allowed government to fund social services through churches and other religious providers. Church-state separationists have opposed the program as a violation of the First Amendment's ban on government support for religion.

But supporters of the concept have said it merely places religious social-service providers on equal footing with secular providers in competing for government contracts.

President Bush has made a priority of expanding such funding of religious providers to include other federal social-service programs.

Although he has consistently run up against opposition in Congress, he has expanded the so-called "faith-based initiative" through several

administrative and regulatory changes.

Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) has offered an amendment to the PRIDE Act that would expand the provisions allowing religious participation to the government's largest social-welfare program, the Social Services Block Grant.

The provision includes explicit authorization for religious groups to receive government funds under the program, even if they discriminate on the basis of religion or ideology in employment.

However, that was just one of many controversies surrounding the bill.

Senate Republican leaders refused to allow a vote on an amendment to the bill that would have raised the federal minimum wage. As a result, Democrats filibustered the bill.

A motion to close debate on the bill—which would require a super majority of 60 votes—failed on a 51 to 47 vote. The vote broke down along party lines, except for retiring Sen. Zell Miller (D-Ga.), who voted to end debate.

Santorum accused Democrats of being obstructionists and blocking the bill with “non-germane amendments.”

Democrats such as Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) countered with the charge that Republicans didn't want to be forced to vote against raising the minimum wage in an election year.

Instead, the chamber passed a temporary resolution continuing the program through the summer.

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