



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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BISHOPS REITERATE OPPOSITION TO HHS MANDATE

Wisconsin's bishops reaffirmed their opposition to a federal mandate that all health insurance plans provide coverage at no-cost for contraceptive and sterilization services.

In a June 15 letter to officials at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the bishops renewed their argument that the religious exemption to the mandate, first announced last year, is flawed. The letter was written in response to a request from HHS for public comment on the agency's plans to accommodate non-exempt religious entities that object to the mandate.

In its current form, the HHS rule exempts religious groups from the mandate if they employ or serve primarily persons of their own religion. The exemption appears to cover parishes and chanceries, but may exclude Catholic schools, charities agencies, hospitals, and colleges.

The bishops argued that the definition of religious employer is an unacceptable constraint on religious liberty. They also stated that the rule is injurious to Wisconsin Catholics by eliminating the only means of avoiding a similar mandate in state law.

As they did in their September 2 letter, the bishops rejected the narrow scope of religion as defined under the mandate.

"The Catholic faith in Wisconsin, a presence that predates our State's admission to the Union, is not limited to the confines of church buildings," the bishops wrote. "It is at Camp Tekawitha in the Diocese of Green Bay, ... It is present in Catholic Charities' financial counseling programs in La Crosse, which serve those struggling to make ends meet. It operates among multiple Catholic entities, such as the Diocese of Madison's Rural Life office, Catholic Charities, and St. Vincent de Paul Councils, which in 2008 joined together to provide mobile disaster assessment and aid to flood-ravaged areas in Wisconsin."

The bishops also cited the Catholic Charities Bureau of Superior's Challenge Center, which serves persons with physical and developmental disabilities, and St. Rafael the Archangel School in Milwaukee, which serves more than 400 students, many of whom are not Catholic.

These programs can inject "vital 'social capital' into a neighborhood with few economic resources," the bishops wrote. "They are as central to our identity and mission as those ministries referenced in the exemption for 'religious employers' in the Final Rule."

The letter also argues that the proposed mandate will intersect with Wisconsin law so as to deny any exemption to many Catholic institutions. Currently these agencies can avoid the state mandate if they self-insure. The federal mandate removes that exemption.

“Excluding a Catholic organization from access to the exemption,” declared the bishops, “denies the essence of their purpose and violates our rights as a Church under the Constitution.”

The bishops end their comments by affirming their solidarity with the bishops of the United States in “asking that the mandate be rescinded or adapted to respect the religious identity of all our ministries and the religious convictions of the Catholic faithful.”

The HHS mandate is one of several recent limits on religious liberty that Catholics will highlight during the upcoming Fortnight of Freedom. This fourteen-day observance runs from June 21 through July 4, 2012, and is dedicated to prayer, catechesis, and public action in support of religious liberty.

To obtain a copy of the bishop’s comments, or to learn more about the Fortnight of Freedom, visit the Wisconsin Catholic Conference website at www.wisconsinatholic.org.

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For more information, contact Kim Wadas at 608-257-0004.

Attachment: [Wisconsin bishops’ comments to Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking](#)