

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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THE WISCONSIN SENATE SHOULD PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

By Kim Wadas, Associate Director

There has been a lot of discussion lately about the federal government's failure to protect religious liberty. Much of this discussion is over whether the Obama Administration adequately protects religious liberty under the Affordable Care Act (ACA), commonly called "Obamacare." However, Catholics might be surprised to know that our own Wisconsin Senate has been reluctant to recognize even the limited liberty protections of current federal law.

Since 2009, Wisconsin state law has required that all health insurance policies sold in Wisconsin provide coverage for prescribed contraceptives and related services. Unlike most states with similar requirements, Wisconsin has failed to provide any recognition of religious liberty and conscience. As a result, Catholic agencies in the state that cannot self-insure are forced to purchase morally objectionable coverage.

Efforts to address this are underway, but are currently stalled in the Wisconsin Senate. Assembly Bill 216, the Health Care Conscience Act, mirrors federal law by providing an exemption from objectionable contraceptive coverage requirements for religious entities. Also, like the Federal Employee Health Benefits Program, Assembly Bill 216 prohibits state employee health insurance from covering most abortion services. Both measures in AB 216 simply align Wisconsin law with federal law.

Assembly Bill 216 is one of two bills whose critics have received significant media attention. Together with Assembly Bill 217, which prohibits medical professionals from knowingly performing sex-selective abortions, AB 216 has been attacked as escalating a "war on women." Disregarding such false claims, the Wisconsin Assembly passed both bills. The Senate, however, has failed to schedule a vote on either.

These bills are a defense of rights, not a declaration of war. Assembly Bill 216 aligns state and federal law, ensuring the protection of our recognized first amendment right of religious freedom – something we prize as citizens, regardless of gender. Assembly Bill 217 further protects human rights by prohibiting gender discrimination, another important area of legal protection.

Claims have been made that the religious exemption under AB 216 will prompt employers to investigate a woman's medical health history, or deny religious employers the ability to cover treatments unrelated to pregnancy prevention. Not so. Insurance companies – not employers – will still be responsible for determining whether an individual procedure is covered. In addition,

an amendment to AB 216 clarifies that a religious employer may provide coverage for a contraceptive when it is not being prescribed to prevent or terminate a pregnancy.

The shakeup over these two bills is the typical political bluster that surrounds anything regarding contraceptive coverage or abortion. It's an environment where even moderate attempts to accommodate religious freedom are deemed "radical" and legislators quickly turn their focus to "higher priority" bills.

However, as a Catholic and as a woman, I call on my fellow Catholics to speak up. Promoting human rights and protecting religious freedom are high priorities and an essential responsibility of government. By affirming already-existing limitations on abortion coverage for state employees, prohibiting sex selective abortion, and permitting faith organizations to serve according to their principles, the Wisconsin Assembly has lived up to its responsibility. I urge all Catholics to contact their Wisconsin State Senator, requesting that the Senate do the same. Urge your Senator to call for a vote on, and pass, Assembly Bills 216 and 217.

(For assistance in contacting your Senators or to request additional information, please contact Kim Wadas at 608-257-0004.)

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