

Catholic Bishops Ask Congress for Contraceptives Reprieve

U.S. Roman Catholic bishops stepped up their battle against President Obama's contraceptives policy on Friday by urging Congress to use its fiscal debate to free religious employers from a mandate requiring insurance coverage for birth control.

In a letter to all 535 members of Congress, Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore suggested two provisions to extend existing federal conscience protections to the contraceptives mandate and strengthen the ability of opponents to seek vindication in federal court.

"The federal government's respect for believers and people of conscience no longer measures up to the treatment Americans have a right to expect from their elected representatives," wrote Lori, who chairs the Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Liberty of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"I urge you in the strongest terms possible to incorporate the provisions ... in the upcoming legislative proposals to fund the federal government," Lori added.

The conference also plans to send out an action alert via email and text message calling on supporters across the country to visit local congressional offices next week when lawmakers are home on break.

Obama's 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act requires employers to provide health insurance coverage through group coverage plans for all contraceptives approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, including the so-called "morning after" pill.

The archbishop's letter underscored a growing sense of urgency among church leaders over the birth control coverage rules

that are due to take effect on August 1 for religiously affiliated employers including universities, hospitals and charities.

The bishops have tried several times to get Congress to act over the past year, amid numerous protests and more than 40 lawsuits by religious groups and employers. But Lori's letter marks their first attempt to use the debates over deficit reduction, the debt limit and government funding.

"To many people, this looks like the main must-pass vehicle going through Congress this year," said Richard Doerflinger, associate director of the conference's Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities.

The new health care law contains an exemption for houses of worship but has come under attack from Catholic leaders, Protestant Evangelicals and other social conservatives who also want religious nonprofit organizations and religious business owners exempted.

The Catholic Church regards contraception as a sin and birth control products like the morning-after pill a form of abortion. In a development that could intensify the debate, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control reported this week that growing numbers of American women are using the morning-after pill.

The Obama administration offered its opponents a compromise on February 1 by proposing new regulations that would allow religious employers to avoid paying for birth control coverage for their workers. Instead, insurers would provide the benefits free through separate coverage plans.

The president of the bishops conference, Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, rejected the plan as inadequate last week.

Doerflinger said church efforts to get favorable language on contraceptives included in funding legislation follows a

congressional precedent for including conscience provisions in appropriations bills in the U.S. House of Representatives.

But he acknowledged that the bishops could face an uphill fight on Capitol Hill. “The pressure everywhere is for just trying to address the money issues,” he said. “That’s why we need to remind members of Congress that these issues of fundamental rights are also pending and won’t go away.”

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