

## Bishops mobilize to guard consciences on contraception

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Sep. 12, 2011



Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities  
3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194  
202-541-3070 • FAX 202-541-3054 • EMAIL: PROLIFE@USCCB.ORG

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Dear Member of Congress:

While I have written previously to encourage your support of the Respect for Rights of Conscience Act (H.R. 1179, S. 1467), recent events make this re

In an interim final rule published August 7, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) proposed to require nearly all employers to provide sterilization and all FDA-approved contraceptives, including some that can cause an abortion, at no cost to women covered by their health insurance plans.

**WASHINGTON** -- The U.S. bishops are working to mobilize Catholics across the country to tell the Obama administration that contraception and sterilization do not constitute preventive care for women and must not be mandated as part of health reform.

Through a new website at [www.usccb.org/conscience](http://www.usccb.org/conscience), the bishops hope to generate thousands of comments to the Department of Health and Human Services about its Aug. 1 proposal that would require nearly all employers to provide sterilization and all FDA-approved contraceptives, including some that can cause an abortion, at no cost to women covered by their health insurance plans.

But time is of the essence, because the 60-day comment period on the HHS proposal closes Sept. 30.

The site also includes a second "action alert" asking Catholics to tell their members of Congress to co-sponsor and pass the Respect for Rights of Conscience Act, which would guarantee the protection of conscience rights in all aspects of implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.

Proposed in the House of Representatives this spring, the legislation was introduced in the Senate Aug. 2 by three Republican senators -- Roy Blunt of Missouri, Marco Rubio of Florida and Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire.

"Respect for rights of conscience in health care has been a matter of strong bipartisan consensus for almost four decades," said Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, in a Sept. 7 letter to Congress.

The Respect for Rights of Conscience Act "would change no current state or federal mandate for health coverage, but simply prevent any new mandates under (the health reform law) -- such as HHS' new set of 'preventive services for women' -- from being used to disregard the freedom of conscience that Americans now enjoy," he added. "This would seem to be an absolutely essential element of any promise that if Americans like the health plan they now have, they may retain it."

In addition to the two action alerts, the bishops' website features backgrounders on conscience-related topics, news releases and documents on the HHS mandate and similar issues, and a commentary by Richard M.

Doerflinger, associate director of the bishops' Secretariat on Pro-Life Activities, about "the high costs of 'free' birth control."

Doerflinger said it is "nonsense" to see the proposed requirement that health plans offer contraceptives without co-pay or deductibles as "free birth control."

"Currently women who want birth control coverage pay for it through their premiums, and sometimes also have a co-pay or out-of-pocket expense," he wrote. "Under the new mandate they will still pay for it, but the cost will be buried in the overall premium -- and everyone else, including churches and other religious employers as well as individual Catholics, will be forced to pay for it in their premiums too, so payments coerced from those who object will make birth control coverage a bit cheaper for those who want it."

The site also offers information about the HHS mandate and what the bishops call the "incredibly narrow" religious exemption to it, the abortion-causing effect of at least one drug that would be included under the mandate and what should constitute preventive services under the health reform law.

"Everyone deserves access to basic life-affirming health care, and health care reform is supposed to serve that goal," says a backgrounder on preventive health. "The effect of this mandate is just the opposite, as it pressures organizations to drop their health coverage for employees and others altogether if they have a moral or religious objection to these particular items."

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