

Franciscan University drops student health insurance plan

Carol Zimmermann Catholic News Service | May. 18, 2012

WASHINGTON -- Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, is discontinuing its student health insurance plan in the upcoming school year in opposition to the Obama administration's mandate requiring most religious employers, including colleges, to provide no-cost contraceptive and sterilization coverage in its health insurance plans.

The school made the announcement to its students in mid-April and the news became public one month later when the university posted its campus health insurance policy on its website.

Media outlets announced that the university was the first Catholic college to drop students from its health insurance plan because of the contraception mandate required by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Michael Hernon, vice president of advancement, said university officials had not expected their decision to receive national media coverage.

When university students, alumni and benefactors were initially told of the change, he said, the reaction was "overwhelmingly supportive."

"We never thought we would be in the position to choose between faith and health care," he told Catholic News Service May 17, adding that the university's decision was not just to protect its religious liberty but to prevent its students from paying increased costs of student health care insurance with the new federal health care policy.

The statement on the university's website outlining the new policy says: "We will not participate in a plan that requires us to violate the consistent teachings of the Catholic Church on the sacredness of life."

On March 16, the Obama administration said most college student health insurance plans will have to include free contraceptive coverage.

Although the policy will apply to all colleges and universities, religiously affiliated institutions will be given an additional year -- by August 2013 -- to comply with the mandate. Colleges that have self-insured student health coverage plans will not be required to offer free contraceptive coverage.

When asked why the university made its decision now when it still had a year before having to comply with the mandate, Hernon said the university would likely have "one year of safe harbor" but there had "not been any talk of exemptions in student health plans." He said the university knew this was a looming issue and felt it had to respond.

He also called the increase in costs that students would have to pay for student insurance a moral issue and said the university does what it can to keep costs low for its students.

Ave Maria University in Naples, Fla., is reportedly also considering dropping its student health insurance plans, according to Fox News.

Ave Maria and Belmont Abbey College in Charlotte, N.C., have filed a lawsuit against the federal government over the HHS mandate saying the contraception regulation forces the colleges to violate their religious beliefs or pay severe fines.

An announcement about Franciscan University's new policy on its website stated that the university has specifically excluded contraceptive and sterilization services from its student health insurance policy. It also noted that the new health plan increased the mandated maximum coverage amount for student policies which would have doubled students' premium cost for the policy this fall.

"Due to these changes," the university said it would no longer require full-time undergraduate students to carry health insurance and would no longer offer a student health insurance plan.

Less than 10 percent of the university's 2,500 students currently use the college-sponsored health plan. Most students are covered by their parents' plan, but for those who are not covered under a parent/guardian plan or personal plan, the university said it would no longer bill them for student health insurance.

"We encourage you to decide how you are going to provide for accidents or illnesses requiring visits to physicians, health clinics, or the hospital emergency room while you are a student here," the statement said, adding that no insurance was needed for basic health related services at the campus health center where visits cost \$5 at the time of service.

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