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Federal funds should not cover Congress members' abortions, bishops say

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The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is urging the Obama administration to comply with a long-standing policy against subsidizing federal employee health care plans that cover abortions for members of Congress and their staffs.

A new rule proposed by the federal government makes no "mention of any limitation with respect to abortion coverage" for members of Congress and their staff, according to comments submitted by the USCCB to the federal Office of Personnel Management.

Currently, the federal government is able to make contributions to health care plans purchased by federal employees, but a long-standing provision called the Smith Amendment -- authored by Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J. -- states that federal funding cannot be used toward plans that cover abortion except in the cases of rape, incest or danger to the life of the mother.

In 2010, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act provided that members of Congress and their staff only may be offered health plans on the newly created state health insurance exchanges.

But according to the USCCB comments on the proposed regulation for health care coverage, the Smith amendment continues to apply because the federal government's employer subsidies for such plans are governed by the same rules as those for other federal employees.

The USCCB's comments were submitted Tuesday during a public comment period on the new suggested regulation about subsidies for federal employee health care plans.

The comments also said a different policy for employees would "contradict repeated assurances from President Barack Obama and administration officials that the health care reform law would not be used to weaken existing abortion policies or expand federal funding for abortion."

The comments were signed by Anthony Picarello, USCCB's associate general secretary and general counsel, and Michael Moses, USCCB's associate general counsel.

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