

Catholic official ‘gravely concerned’ by review of HHS regulation

WASHINGTON - A U.S. bishops’ pro-life official said Feb. 27 she is “gravely concerned” about the Obama administration’s move to review a proposal that would lift a regulation giving federal protection to the conscience rights of health care providers.

Deirdre McQuade, assistant director for policy and communications in the U.S. bishops’ Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, was commenting on an announcement the same day by the Office of Management and Budget that it would review the proposal.

After the review, it will be published in the Federal Register, opening a 30-day period for public comment.

The regulation was issued by the Bush administration’s Department of Health and Human Services and took effect two days before President Barack Obama’s inauguration. It codifies several existing federal statutes prohibiting discrimination against health professionals who decline to participate in abortions or other medical procedures because of their religious or other moral objections.

Once the comment period begins, Ms. McQuade encouraged “participation in this process by all committed to the sanctity of human life, the freedom of conscience and the ethical integrity of our healing professions.”

“Efforts to nullify or weaken any conscience protection will undermine our national heritage of diversity and religious freedom, reduce patients’ access to life-affirming health care, and endanger the national consensus required to enact much-needed health care reform,” she added in a statement.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops praised the regulation when it was first released for public comment last summer and also when it was put into effect, calling the protection of conscience rights for health care workers “long overdue.”