

Catholic organizations, universities place ad objecting to HHS mandate

WASHINGTON - An unusual coalition of national Catholic organizations and universities took to the pages of two Capitol Hill publications Oct. 11 to protest the Obama administration's plan to include contraceptives and sterilization among the mandated "preventive services" for women under the new health reform law.

"As written, the rule will force Catholic organizations that play a vital role in providing health care and other needed services either to violate their conscience or severely curtail those services," the groups said in a full-page ad in Politico and The Hill newspapers. "This would harm both religious freedom and access to health care."

The ad carried the headline, "Support access to health care? Protect conscience rights."

Members of the coalition ranged from the heads of the National Catholic Educational Association and the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities to the leaders of Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities USA.

The advertisement appeared less than two weeks after the close of a 60-day comment period on a proposed religious exemption to the Department of Health and Human Services' inclusion of sterilization and all FDA-approved contraceptives among the preventive services required for all health plans.

Many of the signers of the ad had already submitted comments to HHS on the mandate and the religious exemption that they have called too narrow.

Under the HHS proposal, to qualify for a religious exemption, an organization would have to meet four criteria: “(1) has the inculcation of religious values as its purpose; (2) primarily employs persons who share its religious tenets; (3) primarily serves persons who share its religious tenets; and (4) is a nonprofit organization” under specific sections of the Internal Revenue Code.

“The HHS mandate puts many faith-based organizations and individuals in an untenable position,” the ad said. “But it also harms society as a whole by undermining a long American tradition of respect for religious liberty and freedom of conscience.

“In a pluralistic society, our health care system should respect the religious and ethical convictions of all,” it added. “We ask Congress, the administration and our fellow Americans to acknowledge this truth and work with us to reform the law accordingly.”

In addition to the heads of the NCEA, ACCU, CRS and Catholic Charities, the signers of the ad included the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the chairman of its Committee on Migration; the presidents of the University of Notre Dame and The Catholic University of America; and the head of the Knights of Columbus.

Others endorsing the advertisement included the leaders of the Catholic Association of Latino Leaders, Knights of Peter Claver and its ladies auxiliary, Alliance of Catholic Health Care, U.S. Society of St. Vincent de Paul, National Catholic Bioethics Center, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Medical Association, National Council of Catholic Women, Catholic Volunteer Network, National Catholic Partnership on Disability and Catholic Daughters of the Americas.