

# Deadline for public comments on HHS mandate is April 8

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Archbishop William E. Lori, along with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, is urging Catholics to submit comments opposing the federal mandate, which they say violates Americans' right to religious freedom outlined in the First Amendment.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is accepting public comments through April 8. Comments can be submitted online. According to the Washington, D.C.-based Sunlight Foundation, the HHS mandate has drawn "more comments than any other regulatory proposal on any subject government-wide." Its analysis shows that more than 147,000 people and organizations have commented on the policy, with most comments opposing the mandate.

"I fear that the federal government's respect for believers and people of conscience no longer measures up to the treatment Americans have a right to expect from their elected representatives," Archbishop Lori, chairman of the USCCB's Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, wrote to Congress in February, after President Barack Obama proposed a "compromise" to the mandate, which the U.S. bishops found insufficient.

"The new approach even threatens to undermine access to quality health care, by telling providers, as well as those who offer or purchase insurance, that they need to drop their participation in the health care system if they want to preserve their religious and moral integrity," he wrote. "A restoration of full respect for one of our nation's founding values is urgently needed."

Promulgated by HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius in January 2012, the preventive services mandate is part of the 2010 Affordable Care Act, and would force most employers to pay for contraception, female sterilization and abortion-causing drugs, which are against Catholic teaching.

The U.S. bishops also oppose the mandate's definition of a "religious employer," which they say is too narrow, as it does not include faith-based schools, hospitals or charitable organizations.

The mandate makes no exemption for business owners whose conscience prevents them from offering the controversial drugs and services.

Nationwide, 53 cases with more than 160 plaintiffs from for-profit and nonprofit

companies and organizations have been filed against the federal government over the HHS mandate, according to the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, a Washington, D.C.-based legal institute representing eight of the cases.

The mandate took effect in August 2012 for for-profit businesses; it is scheduled to take effect for nonprofit institutions Aug. 1.

Attorneys general in several states have asked the federal government to expand the religious exemption.

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