

GOP senators seek information on how trafficking grants were awarded

WASHINGTON - A group of Republican senators have asked Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius for detailed information to justify the denial of a one-year grant to the U.S. Catholic bishops' Migration and Refugee Services to aid foreign-born human trafficking victims.

In a Nov. 9 letter to Sebelius, 27 senators asked for various records such as copies of all grant applications, the scores assigned to each application, and documents and communication including telephone and email records dating back one year related to the development of grant guidelines.

In setting a Nov. 18 deadline for a response, they also requested an explanation of the review process that led to the grant awards.

The senators' letter follows a similar request Oct. 13 from Johnny Young, MRS executive director, to George Sheldon, acting assistant secretary of the Administration for Children and Families in the Department of Health and Human Services through which the grants are administered.

Young told Catholic News Service Nov. 11 that his request came days after a meeting he and three MRS staff members attended with Sheldon and two HHS attorneys to discuss why the bishops' program was denied funding despite a successful five-and-a-half-year track record of serving trafficking victims under an earlier contract.

Because of a federal holiday Nov. 11, Health and Human Services officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the senators' letter.

But department spokesman Jesse Moore told CNS Nov 11, "We take all congressional inquiries seriously and we'll respond appropriately."

He could not say whether HHS officials would meet the senators' deadline.

The government's Trafficking Victims Assistance Program has been in the spotlight since HHS officials bypassed MRS and awarded one-year grants to three other agencies in early October to deliver the same services the bishops' agency provided between April 2006 and October 2011.

During that period, MRS received \$19 million to assist 2,783 trafficking victims and family members and develop a nationwide network that encompassed 190 local subcontractors in 44 states and three territories.

The attention has focused on requirements in the guidelines for the new grants that called for agencies to offer the "full range of reproductive service," including abortion and contraception, to trafficking victims.

Citing church teaching, MRS objected to those provisions in its application for one of the 2011-12 grants.

The new grants totaled about \$5 million, but could be worth more if HHS officials decide to extend them for up to two years. The newly funded agencies are Tapestri, based in Atlanta; Heartland Human Care Services in Chicago; and the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, based in Washington.

Heading the list of signatories was Sen. Roy Blunt of Missouri, Sen. Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire and Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida. Ayotte and Rubio are Catholic.

The senators said to Sebelius that their inquiry was driven by the desire to "ensure your department respected USCCB's conscience rights and did not violate current law in awarding this grant ... and whether the USCCB's position regarding abortion referrals was a factor in your department's decision making."

The letter cited an Oct. 31 report in The Washington Post that said senior political appointees at HHS intervened in awarding the new grants to "the bishops' competitors" even though career staffers recommended that MRS be funded because its application scored high by an independent review board. Quoting officials familiar with the awarding process, the newspaper reported that some HHS staffers protested the decision, saying the process was unfair and politicized.