

Illinois bill seeks to allow Catholic Charities to continue adoptions

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. – A bill introduced in mid-October by an Illinois state senator seeks to allow state Catholic Charities agencies to continue their foster care and adoption services only to married couples and single individuals who are not living together.

The bill, introduced by a Republican state senator, would prevent the state from discriminating against religious organizations that handle state contracts for foster care. It would also amend the Illinois Religious Freedom Protection and Civil Union Act to allow religious-based child-welfare agencies to refer same-sex couples wishing to adopt to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

Peter Breen, an attorney for the Thomas More Society representing Catholic Charities agencies, praised the bill.

“The people of Illinois do not want to see Catholic Charities and other religious-based foster care agencies driven out of business, period,” Breen said in a statement. “Lawmakers intended when they passed the civil union law to protect religious groups from compromising their beliefs regarding civil unions.”

Catholic Charities in the dioceses of Joliet, Peoria, and Springfield, as well as Catholic Social Services of Southern Illinois in Belleville, have been involved in legal proceedings with the state since Illinois recognized civil unions on June 1.

At issue is the agencies’ long-standing practice of referring prospective adoptive and foster parents who are cohabiting – regardless of sexual orientation – to other agencies or the Department of Children and Family Services. The state interprets the policy as discriminatory to same-sex couples under the new Illinois Religious Freedom Protection and Civil Union Act, and a Sangamon County Circuit Court judge ruled Sept. 26 the state could begin canceling its foster care and adoption contracts with Catholic Charities.

Bishop Daniel R. Jenky of Peoria announced Oct. 6 that Catholic Charities of the

Diocese of Peoria was withdrawing from all state-funded social service contracts due to increasing clashes between Illinois law and church teaching.

To prevent disruption to the 1,000 foster care children and families now served by Catholic Charities of Peoria, plans call for those state-funded contracts to be transferred by Feb. 1, 2012, to a newly formed nonprofit entity called the Center for Youth and Family Solutions. The Diocese of Peoria and its Catholic Charities will have no connection to the new entity.

The Diocese of Rockford and its Catholic Charities offices stopped offering state-funded adoptions and foster care services when the Illinois civil unions legislation took effect June 1. Catholic Charities of the Chicago Archdiocese stopped offering state-funded foster care services in 2007 because it was unable to obtain liability insurance for the program.