

Members of Congress urge Obama to maintain conscience protection

WASHINGTON - Two members of Congress have called on President Barack Obama to make good on something he said in his May 17 speech to University of Notre Dame graduates, namely that he wished to “honor the conscience of those who disagree with abortion.”

At a May 19 press conference in Washington and in a letter sent that day to the president, Reps. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., and Chris Smith, R-N.J., urged Obama to forgo rescinding the Bush administration’s conscience-protection regulation. They also asked Obama to “commit to defending conscience protections in future rule-making.”

Earlier this year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services proposed to rescind the conscience clause that gives federal protection to the conscience rights of health care providers.

The rule, which took effect two days before Obama took office, codifies three longtime federal statutes prohibiting discrimination against health professionals who decline to participate in abortions or other medical procedures because of their religious or moral objections.

The congressmen’s letter stressed that Obama should use all the tools at his disposal “to keep conscience protections in place and reduce the number of abortions in the United States.”

“The religious and moral views of health care workers should be respected,” Sensenbrenner said during the press conference. “Workers should have the right to refuse to participate in an abortion procedure without the fear of losing their job or being discriminated against.”

In his speech at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, Obama called on people with differing views on abortion to find common ground.

“Let’s work together to reduce the number of women seeking abortions by reducing unintended pregnancies, and making adoption more available, and providing care and support for women who do carry their child to term,” he said.

“Let’s honor the conscience of those who disagree with abortion, and draft a sensible conscience clause, and make sure that all of our health care policies are grounded in clear ethics and sound science, as well as respect for the equality of women,” he added.

Smith noted that he and Sensenbrenner were simply asking the president to make sure “that his deeds match his words.”

He said the president could act on the words of his commencement speech by stopping the efforts of his administration to rescind current conscience regulations. “Protecting conscience is the truly pro-choice position and respects the diversity of opinion in our society as well as the sanctity of life,” he added.

Dr. David Stevens, president of the Christian Medical Association, said in a May 18 statement that if Obama is “truly concerned about finding common ground, he should meet with doctors and patients who would be affected” by the lack of a conscience-protection clause.

He said the regulation was needed to protect doctors, nurses and other health care professionals from discrimination based on their religious beliefs.