

Prelate: Bill would harm church groups' religious identity

DENVER - Denver Archbishop Charles J. Chaput has joined other leaders of faith-based organizations in opposing a bill before the Colorado Legislature they criticized as harmful to preserving religious identity.

They said the bill would hinder the ability of faith-based groups receiving public funds to hire people for leadership positions based on their religion.

The bill would remove the exemption for religious groups from laws prohibiting discrimination in hiring practices. The exemption was passed in 2007.

"It's self-defeating to imagine a Catholic-affiliated ministry where the key guiding people can't be required to be Catholic," said the archbishop in a Jan. 31 interview with the Rocky Mountain News daily newspaper.

Defenders of the bill said that people hired for publicly funded projects should not be subject to a religious test and that the bill would not prevent faith-based groups from using private funds to hire people because of religious affiliation.

Archbishop Chaput, in a Jan. 23 column in the archdiocesan newspaper, the Denver Catholic Register, cited the archdiocesan Catholic Charities as an example of how Catholic organizations provide services to the poor regardless of their religion. But this service is offered to the public "by the Catholic community as part of the religious mission of the Catholic Church," he said.

Many non-Catholics work at Catholic Charities but the leadership positions require "a faithful and practicing Catholic," he said.

Other opponents of the bill include officials of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth Health System, Colorado Christian University, Denver Rescue Mission, Focus on the Family and the Colorado Family Institute.

At a Jan. 30 news conference, opponents issued a statement saying that the bill's passage "could lead to some social service agencies closing their doors, denying help to thousands in our state."

Archbishop Chaput said in his newspaper column that the archdiocese would consider ending the services of Catholic Charities if a law were passed that denies the organization "the freedom it needs to be 'Catholic.'"

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Alice Madden, a Democrat from Boulder, said that she is willing to work with religious groups to clarify the relationship between anti-discrimination laws and the hiring practices of religious groups that accept public funds.

Bruce DeBoskey, director of the Mountain States Region of the Anti-Defamation League, defended the bill. He said that many faith-based groups protesting the bill were in operation before last year's hiring exemption was granted to them.

The bill would restore "the important prohibitions against employment discrimination when using public funds," he said in a Feb. 2 column in the Rocky Mountain News. The bill "would not change religious organizations' ability to chose most of their employees based on religion," he said.