

# Same-sex marriage law prompts changes in D.C. agency's employee benefits

WASHINGTON - Catholic Charities of the Washington Archdiocese has told staff members that a new same-sex marriage law in the District of Columbia has forced the agency to make changes to its health care coverage for spouses of employees.

"I am writing to you to inform you of an important change to our group health care benefit plan that will take effect on March 2, 2010, due to a change in the law of the District of Columbia," said Edward J. Orzechowski, the agency's president and CEO, in a March 1 letter to staff.

He was referring to a new law allowing same-sex marriage. The district was to begin issuing marriage licenses for same-sex couples March 3.

Although Catholic Charities employees whose spouses currently are covered under the agency's health plan would retain that coverage, the spouses of new employees will not be covered and current employees seeking to add a spouse will not be able to do so.

The new marriage law "has a requirement that if you provide spousal benefits to employees, then you must provide those spousal benefits to same-sex couples," Orzechowski said in a March 2 interview with the Catholic Standard, Washington's archdiocesan newspaper.

"The challenge for us was how to comply with the new same-sex marriage law requirements, and continue our partnership with the District of Columbia in serving the poor and vulnerable, and remaining true to the teachings of our faith," he said.

Catholic Charities, which serves 68,000 people annually in the District of Columbia in a variety of outreach programs, has contracts with the city for some of its services, including homeless shelters.

In the letter to employees, he said the existing health coverage of current employees as of March 1 will not be affected by the change, but that “as of March 2, a new plan will be in effect that will cover new employees and requests for benefit changes by current employees.”

“The new plan will provide the same level of coverage for employees and their dependents that you now have, with one exception: spouses not in the plan as of March 1 will not be eligible for coverage in the future,” he said.

Catholic Charities employs 850 people; fewer than 100 of them have their spouse covered by the employee health plan.

During testimony in the fall, the Archdiocese of Washington joined other religious and community groups in voicing objections to the district’s same-sex marriage legislation, noting that marriage between one man and one woman is not only a religious teaching held by the Catholic Church and other faiths, but it is a foundational element of society and for the raising of children.

The archdiocese also raised religious freedom concerns about the bill, and urged the council to change the legislation to respect the rights of religious denominations and individuals who as a matter of conscience and religious belief oppose same-sex marriage.

Orzechowski said in the interview that he regretted that the agency had to change its health care coverage, but “we felt this (plan for health care coverage) was the best alternative, given the circumstances and the requirements placed upon us by this new legislation. We had hoped for a broader religious exemption in this bill.”

On Feb. 1 the agency transferred its 80-year-old foster care and public adoption program in the district to another provider so it would not have to license same-sex couples as foster or adoptive parents.

“We do not expect any further changes, either in benefits or program services, as a result of this bill,” Orzechowski told the Catholic Standard.