

Bishops reject latest proposal on controversial contraception mandate

February 8 2013, by Steven Reinberg, Healthday Reporter



Say it doesn't provide enough protection for Catholic hospitals, schools and charities that object to coverage.

FRIDAY, Feb. 8 (HealthDay News) —Revised rules on birth control coverage under the Affordable Care Act have been rejected by the group that represents Roman Catholic bishops across the United States.

The group issued a statement Thursday that said the Obama administration's attempt to respect the concerns of religious groups does not provide enough protection to Catholic hospitals, schools and charities if they object to providing such coverage for their employees, *The New York Times* reported.

"The administration's proposal maintains its inaccurate distinction among religious ministries," Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, said in

the statement. "It appears to offer second-class status to our first-class institutions in Catholic health care, Catholic education and Catholic charities. The Department of Health and Human Services offers what it calls an 'accommodation,' rather than accepting the fact that these ministries are integral to our church and worthy of the same exemption as our Catholic churches."

Although Dolan said the bishops would continue to fight the federal mandate in court, he added that the bishops want to continue to work with the administration to find a feasible compromise.

"Because the stakes are so high, we will not cease from our effort to assure that health care for all does not mean freedom for few," Dolan said in the statement.

The administration told the *Times* on Thursday that the group's reaction was not unexpected.

The revised rules, first proposed last Friday, would allow religious organizations that object to providing birth control coverage to hand that responsibility off to a third party.

Numerous groups have already challenged the so-called "contraception mandate" in court on the grounds that it violates their religious beliefs. U.S. [health officials](#) have said that the new rules were an attempt to address religious concerns about the mandate.

"The [Obama] administration is committed to working with all employers to give them the flexibility and resources they need to implement the health care law in a way that both protects women's health and also makes common-sense accommodations for religious beliefs," Chiquita Brooks-LaSure, deputy director for policy and regulation at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Center for Consumer

Information and Insurance Oversight, said during a news conference last Friday.

The proposed rules show how nonprofit [religious organizations](#), such as Catholic hospitals or universities, can offer their employees or students separate contraceptive coverage that would be provided by a third party or insurer. There would still be no co-pay and the cost of the coverage would not be carried by the religious organization.

There will be a 60-day comment period on this latest reworking of the mandate, part of the sweeping 2010 health care reform law. The mandate is scheduled to go into effect for religious nonprofits in August.

Meanwhile, women's-rights groups have continued to voice support for the guiding principle behind the original provision.

"This policy delivers on the promise of women having access to birth control without co-pays no matter where they work," Planned Parenthood said in a statement released last Friday. "Of course, we are reviewing the technical aspects of this proposal, but the principle is clear and consistent. This policy makes it clear that your boss does not get to decide whether you can have birth control."

Marcia Greenberger, co-president of the National Women's Law Center, noted, "Our overriding concern is that women have meaningful access to essential preventive [health care](#) services, like [birth control](#), without co-pays or deductibles. We look forward to reviewing and commenting on the proposed regulation in detail to ensure that women are able to make personal health decisions without interference by their bosses."

Although no federal dollars will be used to fund the program, the cost to insurers isn't known and the government is seeking comment on costs, Brooks-LaSure has said.

For institutions that insure themselves, their third-party administrator would work with an insurance company to provide a separate plan to cover contraceptives, she said.

More information: For more on the Affordable Care Act, visit HealthCare.gov.

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