

Supreme Court exempts nun group from Obamacare birth control clause (Update)

January 1 2014

US Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor has granted a temporary reprieve to a group of nuns challenging a requirement of President Barack Obama's healthcare reform law that health insurance they offer include birth control.

Sotomayor acted late New Year's Eve, just hours before major provisions of the Affordable Care Act law were to take effect.

Sotomayor gave the US government until early Friday morning to give the court its response in the matter.

Her order late Tuesday applied to the Little Sisters of the Poor and other Roman Catholic nonprofit groups that use a health plan called the Christian Brothers Employee Benefit Trust, according to the New York Times.

The provisions of the sweeping US health reform law entered into force on Wednesday, some four years after the bill was signed, following years of opposition from Republicans in Congress and from conservative groups.

The landmark Affordable Care Act (ACA) legislation was a bid by Obama to guarantee that uninsured Americans are afforded access to medical care, but opponents have objected strongly to various aspects of the law.

The birth control requirement has been one of the most controversial aspects of the US health law, and has received spirited pushback from religiously affiliated organizations.

The lawsuit by the nuns was one of many challenging the federal requirement for contraceptive coverage.

The US high court agreed in late November to hear several cases that could settle the dispute between the Obama administration and companies run by Christian conservatives over whether those businesses must pay for birth control if contraceptive coverage conflicts with the religious beliefs of the business owner.

The November announcement that the Supreme Court would hear the constitutional challenge to the birth control mandate in *Sebelius vs. Hobby Lobby Stores Inc.*, as well as another case, signaled a new phase of the political battle over the health care law.

A decision on the merits of that case by the full Supreme Court could have broader implications, the legal experts have said.

As a compromise, the Obama administration has said that women who work for nonprofit religious groups that oppose birth control could receive separate coverage not paid for by the employers.

But it refused to offer such assurances to secular businesses whose owners have religious objections to contraception.

That distinction has led to a separate group of lawsuits.

David Green, who founded the Oklahoma-based Hobby Lobby Stores chain involved in one suit, said that business owners "should not have to choose between violating their beliefs and violating the law."

Since the ACA or "Obamacare", was passed in 2010, the legislation has survived multiple repeal attempts by Republican lawmakers, a US Supreme Court hearing, and a disastrous rollout of the website set up to assist the launch of the legislation.

Under the law, it is illegal for insurers to deny coverage because of pre-existing conditions or to limit the level of annual reimbursements for essential services—practices in the past which had left some patients facing financial ruin.

It also now is mandatory for any US resident to enroll in a health care plan.

Administration officials reported this week that some 1.1 million people had enrolled in health plans using the federal website, HealthCare.gov, the main entry point for coverage in 36 states.

Nearly all the enrollments came in the last couple of weeks, as the January 1 deadline approached.

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