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Bishops' agency denied federal grant

Carol Zimmermann Catholic News Service | Oct. 12, 2011

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Since 2006, the U.S. Catholic bishops' Migration and Refugee Services has helped more than 2,700 victims of human trafficking obtain food, clothing and access to medical care.

That service has come to a halt because the agency recently learned it did not receive a new grant award for this work from the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement. MRS' prior contract for the trafficking program ended Oct. 10.

Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, director of media relations for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told Catholic News Service Oct. 11 that she hoped the Catholic Church's "position against abortion, sterilization and artificial contraception has not entered into this decision" by the HHS refugee office to reject MRS' application for a new grant, "especially since this administration has said it stands fully behind freedom of conscience."

She noted that the MRS's anti-trafficking program "ran quite well without these services" and said it would be "tragic if abortion politics harmed the men, women and children already at risk because of the crime and scandal of human trafficking."

MRS officials had no immediate comment, and HHS officials contacted by Catholic News Service did not respond to a request for comment.

In 2009, the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for not making the U.S. Catholic bishops' agency include referrals for abortion, sterilization and artificial contraception in its anti-trafficking program. That case is still pending.

Walsh said in an email to CNS that MRS officials are concerned about their clients and hope they will "not suffer from a clumsy transition to new agencies or from limited or lack of services."

MRS worked with numerous agencies in its anti-trafficking program across the United States. About one-third of these subcontractors were Catholic agencies; others included Lutheran Family Services, Jewish Family Services and anti-domestic violence groups.

Three groups were awarded federal grants for anti-trafficking programs. The groups are Tapestri, based in Atlanta, Heartland Human Care Services in Chicago and the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants based in Washington. The groups were awarded a $5 million grant for the first year with the possibility of adding two additional years.

The U.S. bishops spoke of the relationship between MRS and HHS when they formed an Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty in late September to specifically address actions at various levels of government that pose dangers to the free exercise of religion.

In announcing the new committee, Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan of New York, president of the USCCB,

called into question the HHS requirement that MRS provide the "full range of reproductive service" -- including abortion and contraception -- to trafficking victims in its cooperative agreements and government contracts.

Dolan also reiterated the U.S. bishops' concern about HHS regulations that would mandate the coverage of contraception and sterilization in all private health insurance plans while failing to adequately exempt insurers and individuals that have religious or moral objections to the mandate.

Meanwhile, Catholic Charities agencies are listed as recipients of grants announced in early October for organizations that help support poor and vulnerable families and especially focus on responsible fatherhood. The grants are distributed by HHS' Administration for Children and Families.

The church's role in ending human trafficking cannot be overlooked, according to Miguel H. Diaz, the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican.

In a conference in May at the Vatican on building public-private partnerships in the battle against modern-day slavery, he said the only way to end this global human rights violation is for governments to enlist the help of religious leaders, businesses, consumers and other private entities.

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