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Peoria Catholic Charities withdraws from state social service

by Tom Dermody by Catholic News Service

PEORIA, Ill. -- Citing increasing clashes between Illinois law and church teaching, Bishop Daniel R. Jenky of Peoria announced Oct. 6 that Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Peoria is withdrawing from all state-funded social service contracts.

To prevent disruption to the 1,000 foster care children and families now served by Catholic Charities of Peoria, plans call for those state-funded contracts to be transferred by Feb. 1, 2012, to a newly formed nonprofit entity called the Center for Youth and Family Solutions. The Diocese of Peoria and its Catholic Charities will have no connection to the new entity.

Catholic Charities in the dioceses of Joliet, Peoria, and Springfield, as well as Catholic Social Services of Southern Illinois in Belleville, have been involved in legal proceedings with the state since Illinois recognized civil unions on June 1.

At issue is the agencies' long-standing practice of referring prospective adoptive and foster parents who are cohabiting -- regardless of sexual orientation -- to other agencies or the Department of Children and Family Services. The state interprets the policy as discriminatory to same-sex couples under the new Illinois Religious Freedom Protection and Civil Union Act, and a Sangamon County Circuit Court judge ruled Sept. 26 the state could begin canceling its foster care and adoption contracts with Catholic Charities.

Catholic Charities of Peoria's decision to withdraw from ongoing litigation and from all state-funded social service contracts came after months of deliberation and prayer, said Bishop Jenky.

"I have a responsibility as bishop to assure that Catholic Charities operates consistently with the teachings

and values of the church," he said in the Oct. 6 statement. Recalling the agency's nearly 100-year history of serving the poor and vulnerable, he said it was in keeping with that mission that Catholic Charities partnered with the state to provide services to those most in need.

"Public policy and state laws, however, have increasingly clashed with church teachings in such a way that we no longer can maintain this partnership as a viable option," said Bishop Jenky.

Representatives of both Catholic Charities of Peoria and the Department of Children and Family Services said the solution involving the new nonprofit entity will ensure the continuity of care for each child.

"In the midst of the ongoing debate in the Legislature, the media and the courts, the primary concern for both Catholic Charities and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services has been to prevent disruption to the services provided to the children and families being served by the foster care system," said Patricia Gibson, chancellor and general counsel for both Catholic Charities and the Diocese of Peoria.

"While I am saddened to see Catholic Charities withdraw from this valued good work, I hope that this transition will provide stability for each client family as well as bring peace of mind to the committed staff in these programs," added Gibson.

The foster care contracts total about \$15 million and affect more than 200 Catholic Charities employees, who are invited to transfer with the contracts to the new, independent Center for Youth and Family Solutions. It will be overseen by a five-person community board.

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Both Bishop Jenky and Gibson emphasized that the mission of Catholic Charities will continue, and even expand in other areas, relying exclusively on private funding.

"The agency will continue our witness of God's love throughout the diocese by expanding our long-standing core services to the poor, the needy and the vulnerable," said Bishop Jenky. Among specific areas he listed were food assistance to the hungry, support and outreach to the growing Hispanic population, immigration services, needs of seniors, disaster response services, pro-life and pro-family counseling and social justice advocacy.

The Diocese of Rockford and its Catholic Charities offices stopped offering state-funded adoptions and foster care services when the Illinois civil unions legislation took effect June 1. Catholic Charities of the Chicago Archdiocese stopped offering state-funded foster care services in 2007 because it was unable to obtain liability insurance for the program.

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