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Catholic Health Association: Contraceptive mandate's religious protections insufficient

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NCR Today

The Catholic Health Association (CHA), a group which represents the nation's Catholic hospitals, says in a letter sent to the Department of Health and Human Services Friday that protections for religious institutions in a controversial federal mandate requiring the coverage of contraceptives in health care plans are insufficient.

The move seems to represent a significant shift for the CHA, which was criticized by some U.S. bishops after it announced tentative support for the mandate in February following an initial accommodation from the Obama administration regarding protections for religious organizations, including many Catholic groups.

The U.S. bishops have made the mandate a key concern, creating a campaign around the issue focused on the protection of religious liberty. Part of that campaign is a to be a "Fortnight for Freedom," set to be held June 21 through July 4 and expected to include rallies and demonstrations in dioceses across the country.

Friday's letter, signed by CHA CEO Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, as well as the group's past and present chairpersons, focuses specifically on the definition afforded in the government's mandate for what constitutes a religious organization.

"The most effective way to achieve the Departments' second stated goal would be to actually exempt objecting religious organizations from the mandate by expanding the definition of religious employer to include them," reads the letter at one point.

"This approach would align the policy under the women's preventive care regulation with existing federal law on conscience protection. The exemption in the final rule is narrower than any conscience clause ever enacted in federal law and reflects an unacceptable change in federal policy regarding religious beliefs."

For the full letter from CHA, see below:

CHALetter6-15-12

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