

Thirteen attorneys general push Obama on contraception mandate

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COLUMBUS, Ohio (RNS) Thirteen state attorneys general are urging the federal government to broaden religious exemptions for private businesses under the White House's contraception mandate, claiming the policy violates religious freedoms.

Put simply, the group believes any employer who says he or she objects to contraception should not have to provide contraceptive coverage.

The Department of Health and Human Services' latest proposal, unveiled Feb. 1, would require all employers to provide contraceptive coverage to workers; some nonprofit religious organizations -- primarily houses of worship -- that object to contraception on religious or moral grounds would be exempt.

In a March 26 letter, the coalition asserted that the exclusion should be extended beyond religious institutions to include all conscientious objectors.

At least two dozen suits by private businesses have been filed against the contraception mandate, and 16 have been granted a temporary injunction while the lawsuits are pending, according to the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which is spearheading much of the opposition to the mandate.

In addition, 30 lawsuits by nonprofit religious groups have been filed against the mandate, although most have been rejected as premature because fines for noncompliance don't kick in until 2014.

Dan Tierney, a spokesman for Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine, said the letter was submitted during the comment period that followed a Feb. 1 White House announcement that the exemptions would be expanded to include all houses of worship, dioceses and affiliated organizations such as colleges and hospitals.

DeWine said the revamped Feb. 1 compromise will still cost money, and the exemption should apply to all detractors, including those such as small business owners who may object to contraception.

"These regulations will force many Ohio employers to choose between harsh penalties and violating their conscience," DeWine said in a news release. "This is another example of why Obamacare is bad policy, and it is another reason why I have joined attorneys general across this county to protect American families from its illegal overreach."

HHS spokesman Fabien Levy said the mandate remains a proposal, and that the attorneys general are simply acting on their right to object during the public comment period, which ends April 8.

While the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and other critics continue to oppose the revamped exemptions as insufficient, some groups, such as Catholics United, have applauded the suggested changes.

"This is a victory not only for the Obama Administration, but for the Catholic Church," said James Salt, executive director of Catholics United, in a statement. "As Catholics United said from the very beginning, reasonable people knew it was right to be patient and hopeful that all sides could come together to solve this complex issue."

The attorneys general of Alabama, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas and West Virginia signed the letter.

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