

ACLU complains of bias in Catholic antitrafficking programs funded by U.S. Restrictions on contraceptives and abortion referrals: Restrictions on contraceptives and abortion referrals

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The American Civil Liberties Union has sued the federal government, charging that it allows the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to use taxpayer dollars to impose its religious doctrines on victims of human trafficking.

The Department of Health and Human Services awarded the bishops' conference \$6 million in grants from 2006 to 2008 to aid victims of human trafficking, many of whom are female prostitutes, according to the ACLU.

In keeping with Catholic teaching, the bishops require subcontractors to pledge not to use the grant money to pay for contraceptives or abortion referrals.

"Everything we do has to be consistent with our beliefs," said Sister Mary Ann Walsh, a spokesperson for the Washington-based U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "We do all these social services, and we do it better than anyone else."

The ACLU's lawsuit, filed January 12 in the U.S. District Court of Massachusetts, says the Department of Health and Human Services has "permitted the USCCB to impose its own religiously based substantive restrictions on grant funds."

HHS officials knew that the bishops would impose restrictions on abortion referrals and contraceptives but still allowed them to receive the grants, according to the ACLU.

As many as 17,500 people are forced, coerced or deceived by traffickers into coming to the U.S. every year, according to government estimates. The vast majority are women, many of whom are forced into prostitution and sexually dangerous situations and need contraceptives and access to abortions, the ACLU argues.

Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which authorized federal funding to aid victims, in 2000, and reauthorized the act in 2003, 2005 and 2008. President Bush signed the renewal bill December 23 at the White House.

On January 11, many churches, including those of the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, observed National Human Trafficking Awareness Day, a day committed to prayer and action.

“Human trafficking grosses almost as much revenue as the illegal drug industry, and it occurs in obvious places, such as brothels that skirt major sporting events worldwide, and in not-so-obvious places, such as local malls in the United States,” said Mary J. Streufert, director of the ELCA’s justice for women program. *–Religion News Service*