

Catholic Charities drops spousal benefits in response to same-sex marriage law: Policy applies to new employees

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The archdiocese of Washington's social service branch will stop offering benefits to spouses of new employees in a bid to balance the District of Columbia's new same-sex marriage law with Catholic opposition to homosexuality.

Edward Orzechowski, president and CEO of Catholic Charities of Washington, informed the group's 850 employees of the change in a March 1 letter, two days before gay marriage became legal in the city.

"We sincerely regret that we have to make this change," said Orzechowski, "but it is necessary to allow Catholic Charities to continue to provide essential services to the clients we serve in partnership with the District of Columbia while remaining consistent with the tenets of our religious faith."

Employees whose spouses or children are currently covered will not be affected by the new policy, Orzechowski said. The local Catholic Charities agency serves 120,000 people yearly in the District and five Maryland counties, according to the archdiocese.

Washington's City Council voted in December to legalize gay marriage over the strenuous objections of the archdiocese, which argued that the bill should have had stronger protections for religious groups that oppose homosexuality.

Faced with a similar dilemma several years ago, the archdiocese of San Francisco took a different approach to benefits, allowing employees to choose from a range of "domestic partners" including parents or siblings, to add to their coverage.

In February, Catholic Charities in Washington transferred its foster care program, including 43 children, 35 families and seven employees, to another provider, rather than potentially be forced to place children with gay couples. Affiliated groups in Boston and San Francisco have taken similar actions. -*Religion News Service*