



The right of religious liberty, the First Freedom guaranteed by our Constitution, includes a right to provide and receive health care without being required to violate our most fundamental beliefs. Especially since 1973, when abortion became legal nationwide, federal lawmakers have worked in a bipartisan way to ensure that Americans can fully participate in our health care system without being forced to take part in abortion or other procedures that violate their conscience.

But the need to improve current laws is clear, because the right of conscience is still under attack:

- Under the new health care reform law, the federal government is demanding that almost all health plans fully cover female sterilization and a wide range of drugs and devices to prevent pregnancy, including those that can cause an early abortion. Even individuals and organizations with a religious objection to abortion, sterilization or other procedures are forced to take part.
- A Catholic agency that for years had provided excellent service lost its federal grant to serve the victims of human trafficking, because it could not, in conscience, comply with a new requirement to facilitate abortions and other morally objectionable procedures for its clients.
- Dedicated health care professionals, especially nurses, still face pressure to assist in abortions under threat of losing their jobs or their eligibility for training programs.

- In some states, government officials are seeking to force even Catholic hospitals to allow abortions or provide abortion coverage in order to continue or expand their ministry.

This is why Rep. Diane Black (R-TN) and over a hundred other members of Congress of both parties are sponsoring the Health Care Conscience Rights Act (H.R. 940). The Act would improve federal law in three ways:

1. Correcting loopholes and other deficiencies in the major federal law preventing governmental discrimination against health care providers that do not help provide or pay for abortions.
2. Inserting a conscience clause into the health care reform law, so its mandates for particular “benefits” in private health plans will not be used to force insurers, employers and individuals to violate their consciences or give up their health insurance.
3. Add a “private right of action” to existing federal conscience laws, so those whose consciences are being violated can go to court to defend their rights. (Current enforcement is chiefly at the discretion of the Department of Health and Human Services, which is itself sponsoring some attacks on conscience rights.)

All House and Senate members should be urged to support and co-sponsor the Health Care Conscience Rights Act, so our First Freedom can regain its proper place as a fundamental right protected in our health care system. For more details, see: www.usccb.org/conscience.

What can you do to ensure the protection of religious freedom at home and abroad?

The U.S. Bishops have called for a Fortnight for Freedom from June 21 to July 4. Please visit www.fortnight4freedom.org for more information on this important time of prayer, education, and action in support of religious freedom!