

Testimony on H620
Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington
March 17, 2016
Presented by Carrie Handy, Respect Life Coordinator

My name is Carrie Handy. I am the Respect Life Coordinator for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Diocese about H620.

If enacted, H620 would mandate insurance coverage of all forms of contraception, as well as sterilization, by all public and private insurance providers in Vermont. Employers that offer health insurance to their employees would be required to cover these items in full.

There is no provision for a religious exemption from this mandate. We believe this omission runs counter to the principles of freedom, tolerance and diversity so proudly championed in Vermont and strikes at the religious freedoms guaranteed in the Constitution of the United States.

Without a religious opt-out, organizations such as the Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington will be forced to pay for procedures and prescriptions that violate their deeply held religious beliefs. For that reason, we ask you to include an exemption for institutions that have a religious objection to these items.

In listening to testimony and committee discussion last week, I heard many statements expressing disagreement with the Catholic Church on contraception and sterilization. Some comments implied Catholic teaching on contraception and sterilization is trivial and not worthy of consideration. Let me remind you that protection of religious freedom was built into the U.S. Constitution precisely to protect against discrimination on such grounds.

Let me assure you that our beliefs about contraception and sterilization go to the very heart of Catholic teaching on marriage and openness to life, and though others may not understand or agree, we take them extremely seriously. Indeed, some drugs and devices marketed as contraception, including IUDs and the “emergency contraceptive” called Ella, can cause the death of a newly conceived human being, hence in our moral understanding can act as abortifacients.

The bill concerns not just religious institutions, but individual religious believers as well. We have received inquiries from Catholics wanting guidance on the question of participating in health care plans which cover items that contradict Catholic moral teaching.

In fact, this new mandate will combine with the federal Affordable Care Act to put religious adherents and institutions in an impossible bind. There will be only two ways to avoid paying for morally objectionable items: Drop all health coverage, and then be fined by the federal government for that violation, or try to provide a health plan that does not comply with the state mandate, and then be fined or otherwise punished for violating state law, even if the sponsor is exempt from the separate federal contraceptive mandate on religious grounds. This is not the way citizens hope to be treated by their government.

An important role of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington is to teach the Faithful, to help them understand our beliefs and theology, to assist them in applying Catholic principles to modern living, and, as it relates to this topic, to promote morally acceptable means of family planning. We do this in many ways.

As an example, we require all engaged couples seeking sacramental marriage in the Catholic Church to attend a series of marriage preparation classes that cover a host of topics related to Catholic marriage. One of these topics is that of family planning. We not only set forth Catholic teaching about contraception, abortion and sterilization, but offer alternatives. Natural Family Planning, known in the secular world as Fertility Awareness Methods, is a completely natural, environmentally friendly, and cost-free approach to avoiding or achieving pregnancy by observing some simple fertility signs. It is highly successful in avoiding pregnancy when used carefully, and has been found to have many positive benefits beyond family planning. Studies show that couples who use this method are also much more likely to have successful marriages.

We also offer a speaker's bureau and information on our website to help Catholics learn more about Catholic beliefs on sexual morality and related topics. We support Catholic parish religious education programs and Catholic schools in teaching about marriage and sexuality in age-appropriate ways that are in conformity with Catholic beliefs. This is part of our mission of evangelization and catechesis, and we take it very seriously. It is also part of our fundamental right to exercise our religion, for which we have a legitimate expectation and right to the government's protection.

We also take seriously the responsibility to offer our employees comprehensive health care coverage. We offer group health insurance to all employees of the Diocese, Catholic Charities, and all Diocesan Catholic schools and parishes. As I stated earlier, unfortunately, the terms of H620 put us in an impossible situation with regard to continuing to offer coverage to our employees.

We are not requesting a right to prohibit our employees from obtaining the items described in H620 if they choose to do so. Rather we are asking that we, as a religious institution, not be forced to provide or pay for, and in that way be complicit in, actions that contradict our religious values, indeed that undermine the very messages we have a right and duty to teach in these same institutions.

We therefore ask you to include in the bill language that would allow us to exercise our religious freedom, so that we may opt out of providing and funding services in our health care plan that conflict with our deeply held religious and moral beliefs. Including such language would be a step forward in upholding the principle of religious freedom and the ethics of tolerance that the Vermont legislature has sought to preserve in other circumstances for other diverse groups and individuals.

In short, this moment provides an opportunity for this body to stand up for religious freedom for all Vermonters of all Faiths, and we respectfully urge you to do so.