



## ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF BURLINGTON

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### **Testimony on H620**

**April 1, 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.

I am here today not to ask you to deny any woman or family their freedom of choice but rather to ask you to honor the religious freedoms outlined in the Constitution of the United States and ensure that with H620, Vermont will uphold the commitment to religious freedom upon which our country was founded.

Let me repeat: We are not asking for the right to prevent anyone from accessing the services and prescriptions described in H620, but rather, we ask that religious institutions such as ours not be forced to be complicit in items that violate our deeply held religious beliefs. This type of exemption is provided at the Federal level under the provisions of the Affordable Care Act and in nearly all 49 other States in some form.

To omit such an exemption from H620 would run counter to the principles of freedom, tolerance and diversity so proudly championed in Vermont under other circumstances.

To be clear: You need not agree with the beliefs of a religious entity in order to have an obligation to protect its right to practice according to those beliefs. Our beliefs about contraception and sterilization go to the very heart of Catholic teaching. 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.

As I said, 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 as a religious institution.

We believe that the First Amendment was designed with precisely this kind of situation in mind.

To offer the same kind of opt-out that is offered under the ACA would put no one at risk nor deny choice to anyone. Not to offer such an opt-out would, however, for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington, impede our right to exercise our religion, for which we have a legitimate expectation and right to the government's protection. It would also put at similar risk any religious institution in the future whose beliefs are unpopular, misunderstood or maligned by those in power.

We therefore ask you to include in the bill language that would allow a conscience objection. 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 so eagerly 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.