

November 30, 2011

The Honorable Barack H. Obama  
President  
United States of America  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

The undersigned organizations, representing millions of health care consumers, patients and providers, strongly supported passage of the Affordable Care Act and are working to protect the Act from efforts to undermine or repeal it. To that end, we are writing in opposition to the religious employer exemption issued as an Interim Final Rule on August 3, 2011, to the requirement that all new health insurance plans provide coverage for contraceptives without cost-sharing, and to urge you to reject calls to deny additional women the coverage they need.

The religious employer exemption strikes at the heart of the Affordable Care Act's guarantee that all Americans will have a baseline of coverage that can never be denied. Based on recommendations of the Institute of Medicine, an independent panel of medical and public health experts, which found that contraceptive care and counseling improves health outcomes for women and their children, the Department of Health and Human Services determined that contraception should be covered by all new health insurance plans and provided without cost-sharing. Allowing certain employers to fail to comply with this otherwise general coverage guarantee—one that the Institute of Medicine and HHS found will improve the health of women and children—undermines a core tenet of the Affordable Care Act that all insurance plans must meet basic federal standards.

Notably, many of the organizations urging a broader exemption opposed the Institute of Medicine recommendations and the Administration's decision to guarantee coverage of contraceptives. In testimony before the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health, for example, Jane G. Belford, Chancellor of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, testified that the contraceptive coverage guarantee "is irretrievably flawed and should be rescinded in its entirety." As strong supporters of the women's preventive services benefit and its promise to improve the health and lives of millions of Americans, we are gravely concerned that the religious employer exemption and efforts to broaden it are intended, consistent with their opposition to the requirement, to deny women this important coverage.

Moreover, many of the organizations urging an even broader exemption are supporting H.R. 1179, introduced by John Fortenberry, which would allow health plans to opt-out of covering *any* medical item or service. H.R. 1179 would make meaningless the Affordable Care Act's guarantees that all plans offer a standard minimum set of services through the Essential Health Benefits and Preventive Health Services provisions. The religious employer exemption—and now calls to expand it—is but another step in efforts to undermine the Affordable Care Act and its critical protections.

Finally, the preventive services protection generally, and the contraceptive coverage guarantee specifically, is strongly supported by the American public as one of the core benefits of this landmark law. Nearly three-fourths (71 percent) of voters support efforts to make contraceptives available without co-pays. We are gravely concerned that efforts to deny the benefits of the Affordable Care Act to some is part of a concerted strategy to undermine support for this law at a critical time.

As strong supporters of the Affordable Care Act and the benefits this landmark law will provide to millions of Americans, we urge you to stand sentry against efforts to undermine one of its core protections.

Sincerely,

American Medical Student Association (AMSA)

American Nurses Association

Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum

Black Women's Health Imperative

Coalition of Labor Union Women

Community Catalyst

Doctors for America – Access to Affordable, High-Quality Health Care for Everyone

Families USA

Health Care for America Now

National Council of La Raza (NCLR)

PHI – Quality Care *through* Quality Jobs

Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law

Service Employees International Union

United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

Universal Health Care Action Network (UHCAN)

US Action

Young Invincibles

YWCA