

White House compromise still guarantees contraceptive coverage for women

By [David Nakamura](#), Peter Wallsten and N.C. Aizenman, Updated: Friday, February 10, 1:18 PM

Seeking to allay the concerns of Catholic leaders and head off an escalating political storm, President Obama on Friday announced an adjustment to the administration's health-care rule requiring religiously affiliated employers to provide contraceptive coverage to women.

Women still will be guaranteed coverage for contraceptive services without any out-of-pocket cost, but will have to seek the coverage directly from their insurance companies if their employers object to birth control on religious grounds.

Religiously-affiliated non-profit employers such as schools, charities, universities, and hospitals will be able to provide their workers with plans that exclude such coverage. However, the insurance companies that provide the plans will have to offer those workers the opportunity to obtain additional contraceptive coverage directly, at no additional charge.

Churches remain exempt from the birth-control coverage requirement. And their workers will not have the option of obtaining separate contraceptive coverage under the new arrangement.

The administration's decision to make an adjustment reflected the high political stakes of an issue that had generated intense criticism in recent days from a growing chorus of Catholic and Republican leaders, as well as some Democrats. In Congress and on the campaign trail, leading Republicans attacked the Obama administration's position as a war on religion.

In an appearance in the White House briefing room, Obama said he instructed aides to craft a solution quickly in the wake of the outcry.

“After many genuine concerns were raised over the last few weeks — and the more cynical desire to make this into political football — it became clear that spending months hammering out a solution was not an option; we had to move this faster,” Obama said, flanked by Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, whose agency is administering the rule.

“I’ve been confident from the start we could work out a sensible approach here,” the president added. “Some folks in Washington may want to treat this as another political wedge issue, but it shouldn’t be. I never saw it that way. It’s people with goodwill on both sides of the debate sorting through a complicated issue to find a solution that works for everyone. Today’s announcement has done that.”

White House officials said Obama called Archbishop Timothy Michael Dolan, Sister Carol Keehan, president of the Catholic health group and a key White House ally in Obama’s health-care overhaul, and Planned Parenthood President Cecile Richards to explain the new rules. The officials declined to elaborate on the nature of the conversations.

During a conference call with reporters to explain details, a senior White House official said that the impact of the change on insurers would be cost neutral--and even potentially cost-saving--because on balance it would reduce the need to provide medical coverage related to unwanted pregnancies and other conditions that can be avoided with birth control.

“The new policy ensures women can get contraception without paying a co-pay and addresses important concerns raised by religious groups,” the White House said in a statement.

Progressive groups and Democratic lawmakers quickly applauded the compromise, and the White House noted that two organizations that had disagreed on the issue -- Planned Parenthood, which supported the original rule, and the Catholic Health Association, which opposed it-- released statements praising the new policy.

Keehan said her organization was “very pleased” with the announcement.

“This difference has at times been uncomfortable, but it has helped our country sort through an issue that has been important throughout the history of our great democracy,” Keehan’s statement said.

Still, the announcement drew a swift rebuke from some conservative Catholics. Jim Towey, who headed President George W. Bush’s faith-based office and now is president of Ave Maria University, a conservative Catholic school near Naples, Fla.,

said the university board planned to meet Monday to discuss legal action against the new mandate.

“We subsidize these health plans, so the question is whether university resources are underwriting this,” Towey said.

“I still don’t think President Obama gets it,” Towey added. “This is a fig-leaf of a political compromise that’s trying to have it both ways, to mollify women’s groups and so-called centrist Catholics. But I think fundamentally this is not the end of this debate, it’s just the beginning.”

The compromise goes beyond similar accommodations in Hawaii and several other states, because in those states, insurers can charge an extra premium for the contraceptive coverage.

Administration officials did not explain why the compromise was not incorporated earlier, despite the fact that it had been widely discussed as early as last fall.

“This is a tough issue,” an administration official said. But, the official added, “I think what we’re doing today is a very, very common-sense, responsible way forward.”

That policy proposed last summer and confirmed last month as part of Obama’s health-care overhaul law required employers to provide female employees the full range of contraceptive coverage, including birth control, the “morning-after pill” and sterilization services.

The measure exempted churches but covered religiously affiliated schools, charities, colleges and hospitals, meaning that many Catholic-run institutions would have had to offer insurance plans that church leaders say violate their teachings.

Catholic bishops led a firestorm of opposition to the rule, distributing letters and other materials to be shared with millions of worshippers.

Republicans, and [some Democrats](#), seized on the issue, with GOP presidential candidates accusing Obama of [waging a war](#) against religion. Republican lawmakers threatened to [pass a law invalidating](#) the White House ruling unless the White House relented.

In a speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington on Friday morning, White House hopeful Rick Santorum called the controversy an example of the Obama administration overstepping its authority in people’s private lives.

“It’s not about contraception,” Santorum said, calling birth control costs “minor expenses.” “It’s about government control of your lives.”

Former Mike Huckabee, a former Arkansas governor, told the group the issue should be a rallying cry for all conservatives, even though opposition to the rule was championed by Catholics.

“We are all Catholics now,” said Huckabee, who was raised a Southern Baptist. Noted that he had never expected to make such a statement, he added: “Praise the Lord and pass the offering plate. It’s time to get serious.”

The controversy also exposed divisions among Democrats, with several stepping forward in recent days to criticize Obama’s handling of the issue. Sen. Joe Manchin (D-W. Va.), who co-sponsored legislation to reverse the rule, called the measure “un-American” in a letter to Obama last week. Former Virginia Gov. Timothy M. Kaine, one of Obama’s closest political allies, said [Obama must find a middle path](#).

At the same time, White House officials say they came under intense pressure from women’s groups and many Democratic lawmakers to stand firm on the underlying principle of the rule -- that women should have full access to contraception.

It was not immediately clear whether Friday’s announcement would satisfy the rule’s most ardent critics.

In addition to Hawaii, three other states--Missouri, New York, and West Virginia--also require insurers to provide workers birth-control “riders,” according to an analysis by the Guttmacher Institute, a non-profit research organization specializing in women’s reproductive health.

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