

CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE

IN GOOD CONSCIENCE

December 14, 2011

US House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Ranking Member Cummings,

On behalf of Catholics for Choice, I wish to thank you for holding a hearing on the critical importance of access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare for trafficking victims. I also applaud your decision to allow them to express in person the significance of these services to their recovery and the importance of having their choices respected. In keeping with our Catholic faith and our social justice tradition, we firmly believe in the dignity of all people and in our particular obligation to advocate for those who are most vulnerable, including particularly these brave women. As a result, we like the majority of the more than 68 million Catholics in the United States support policies such as the decision by the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to give preference to organizations that provide information on and referrals to the full range of reproductive healthcare services when administering Trafficking Victim Services Grant Awards.

Women who have suffered the incomprehensible physical and emotional abuses of human trafficking should be assured they may access the best possible care for combating the myriad healthcare problems that can result from continued abuse. Therefore, it is in the best interests of all that only those social service agencies committed to providing access to the full range of healthcare services do so. Women need support and compassionate care when they seek reproductive healthcare services, not judgment and disdain.

For trafficking victims, who have already suffered the injustice of having their freedom of conscience cruelly denied, there should be no obstacles to obtaining information so that they may make their own decisions about critical, sometimes life-saving reproductive healthcare services to treat sexually transmitted infections or terminate a pregnancy. Therefore it is reasonable and ethical to require all social service agencies receiving Trafficking Victim Services Grant Awards—whether secular or religiously affiliated—to guarantee timely referrals to ensure that trafficking victims receive comprehensive healthcare in a timely manner. Moreover, good practice should also compel a social service or healthcare institution to make sure that the consciences of both the service provider and the client are accommodated by having policies, such as referrals, in place that enable individuals to receive information about whatever medications they need, procedures they require or services they seek.

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Like many Catholics, we accept that conscience has a role to play in providing social services, particularly those related to healthcare. Indeed, it is a common, correct and essentially Catholic understanding that each person has a conscience, an inviolable and personal inner core that informs our decision making and compels each of us to act in the way that we have decided is morally correct. Catholic teachings also require us to respect the conscience-based decisions that other people make. Our tradition tells us to care for the most vulnerable. Surely it must be possible to provide taxpayer-subsidized assistance to human trafficking victims—some of the most vulnerable people in society—without restricting the exercise of their dignity when it comes to making personal, moral decisions about their own reproductive healthcare.

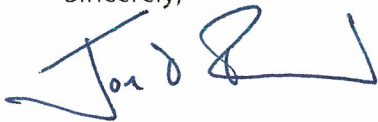
When the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and other conservative Catholic organizations request exemptions from these basic standards, however, they seek more than protection for individual conscience. In fact, they seek to denigrate individual conscience by imposing their own narrow religious views about sexuality and reproductive healthcare—views that are only shared by a tiny minority of Catholics. Permitting these organizations to keep the billions of dollars they receive from government contracts without having to adhere to the standards that apply to other groups or organizations working in the same field would be to grant the USCCB and their colleagues a pass from the requirement to play by the same rules as everybody else.

The bishops' concept of "religious liberty" and "conscience protection" under the Trafficking Victim Services Grant Awards would allow one narrow interpretation of one religious tradition to run roughshod over the religious beliefs and consciences of every single trafficking victim seeking services from any grantee. Having failed to convince Catholics in the pews on issues of reproductive healthcare, the USCCB and allied conservative Catholic organizations are now attempting to impose their agenda on all people by seeking preferential treatment for a distorted notion of "conscience rights" in the administration of human trafficking grants. Condoning the refusal by social service agencies not only to provide services but also to even refer trafficking victims to another provider endangers many women's access to the healthcare they need. In fact, it constitutes state-sponsored discrimination against individuals who have already often been ostracized from and failed by society and encroaches on the individual consciences of those seeking care and assistance.

Organizations funded by the US government must serve those in need by providing services while respecting a client's conscience, her moral agency and her freedom to follow her own beliefs. She should also be protected from any harm that may result from the impact of religious beliefs that she may not share. The HHS decision to give preferred status to social service agencies that provide trafficking survivors with referrals for the full range of healthcare services, including reproductive healthcare, is the right move. It allows survivors to take the first steps toward regaining their freedom to make their own decisions, in accordance with their consciences, about their bodies, their health and their future.

As you consider the HHS decision and reauthorization of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, I therefore urge you to ensure that the voices of trafficking victims and the sanctity of individual conscience continue to be respected by maintaining access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare services in all grants.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon O'Brien". The signature is stylized and written in a cursive-like font.

Jon O'Brien
President