

Insurance Times: NY pols strike deal on women's health, birth control bill

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ALBANY — Legislative leaders have agreed to require insurers to provide an array of women's health services including contraceptives, prompting the state Catholic Conference's promise to fight the measure.

The bill, scheduled for Assembly and Senate votes last week, will require employers to provide expanded coverage for prevention, early detection and treatment of breast and cervical cancer and the bone density-thinning condition called osteoporosis.

The bill would also require all but a few employers to offer insurance coverage of contraceptive drugs and devices obtained through prescriptions. Only churches and other religious institutions for which the main mission is religious and which primarily serves people of that religion would be exempt. Those employees must have access to lower group rates for separate coverage.

Religious hospitals and social service agencies, however, would be required to offer contraceptive coverage.

"We're disgusted," said Dennis Poust, a spokesman for the New York Catholic Conference, which represents the state's Catholic bishops and Cardinal Edward Egan. "This is the New York state Legislature thumbing its nose at the Catholic Church."

He said the group doesn't oppose having its employees secure contraceptive coverage directly with insurers. But the legislative leaders crossed the line by determining that some Catholic agencies must provide contraceptive coverage because they don't meet the Legislature's criteria.

The Catholic Conference will urge Gov. George Pataki to veto the bill and will consider an injunction and legal action, Poust said. He also said he is uncertain if the church would follow the law: "I can't see us abiding by it."

New York Civil Liberties Executive Director Donna Lieberman said the narrow exemption protects the rights of women and religious agencies.

Pataki will sign the bill, said spokesman Michael McKeon.

Lobbyists supporting the contraceptive measure estimate that as many as 4 million more women would be covered as a result of the law.

"By including contraception and cancer and osteoporosis screenings in this legislation, we are addressing women's health in a comprehensive manner," said Assemblywoman Deborah Glick, a Manhattan Democrat who was a leader supporter of the bill.

JoAnn Smith, president of Family Planning Advocates, said when New York adopts the bill joining 19 other states, more than half the women in America will have insurance coverage for the array of services. Screenings and treatments for some cancers and other afflictions specific to men have long been covered.

"This legislation will result in dramatic declines in the number of women who were previously undiagnosed with often preventable and treatable diseases," said Sen. Mary Lou Rath, an Erie County Republican.

The bill will also:

- Provide \$500,000 to the Healthy Women Partnership Program for people who can't afford copays and to establish an educational outreach program to help detect breast cancer.

- Require coverage for annual mammograms beginning at age 40. Current law requires biannual mammograms from 40-49 years and annual exams after that.
- Require coverage of preventive bone-density exams.
- Allow women to choose an obstetrician/gynecologist without a referral from a primary care physician.