

Catholics blast NY contraceptive benefit law

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ALBANY (AP) — A spokesman for the state's Roman Catholic bishops accused Gov. George Pataki of engaging in "election-year politics" by signing a bill that mandates employers' insurance cover contraceptives along with other women's health services. The measure could force hundreds of Catholic employers, such as hospitals and schools, to pay for such coverage despite church teachings against the use of contraceptives, said Dennis Poust, spokesman for the New York Catholic Conference, which represents the bishops and Cardinal Edward Egan.

The conference had asked Pataki to veto the bill, approved by the Legislature in June, and support a measure minus the contraception coverage. The Republican governor is seeking a third term. Aides announced last Tuesday that he had signed the measure into law. "Right now, we're in a mood of disappointment that the governor has taken this action, following disappointment with both houses of the Legislature," Poust said. The spokesman said the governor's signature was not surprising. "It's election-year politics at its worst."

Pataki spokesman Joseph Conway denied the accusation. "This new law will ensure that thousands of women across New York state have greater access to the vital health care services they need and deserve, and it's consistent with the governor's long-standing record of support for important women's health initiatives," the spokesman said. Conway cited the minimum 48-hour maternity stay Pataki signed into law in 1996, among other examples.

The new law requires employers to provide expanded coverage for prevention, early detection and treatment of breast and cervical cancer and the bone density-thinning condition called osteoporosis.

It also mandates that most employers offer insurance coverage of contraceptives obtained through prescriptions. Exemptions apply to churches and other institutions, such as seminaries, with a mainly religious mission and which primarily serve people of that religion.

The state does not require employers to provide prescription drug coverage. But, under the new law, those that do must cover contraceptives, beginning Jan. 1.

"The governor's action puts us in the position of either violating our teachings, canceling our prescription drug coverage or suing on constitutional grounds," Poust said.

The state's bishops will discuss the law during a meeting later this month, and may decide to take the battle to court, Poust said.

The Catholic Conference has said the measure is anti-Catholic and limits religious freedom. Supporters of the bill said the church leaders have been discriminating against employees who don't share the church's beliefs.

"I've always felt it was an inappropriate posture by the church to deny women access to contraceptives via their health insurance," said Assemblywoman Deborah Glick, a Manhattan Democrat who fought for the bill. "The reality is, if one does not want to use contraception, they simply don't have to."

Poust has acknowledged that many employees who work in Catholic-related organizations not exempt under the law, including 40 hospitals, 60 nursing homes and

hundreds of charities — and even many of the state's 7.3 million Catholics — do not agree with or follow the church's ban on the use of contraceptives.

“This law ends decades of discrimination against women by health insurers and allows women greater control over their own health care,” said JoAnn Smith, president of Family Planning Advocates of New York State.

State Comptroller H. Carl McCall, Pataki's Democratic rival for governor, strongly supports the measure, said spokesman Steven Greenberg.

“He believes it's a matter of fundamental fairness,” the aide said. “This bill is the right thing to do.” p