

On June 21, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) of U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) declared, contrary to the plain meaning of current federal law, that the California Department of Managed Health Care can continue to force all health plans under its jurisdiction to cover elective abortions.

In a statement issued June 22, the California Catholic Conference of Bishops noted that after almost two years of little or no activity the OCR has ruled "that the bishops of California and others filing complaints do not have standing to object to a California agency mandating that religious organizations and individuals pay for all abortions in their managed health care plans."

Bishop Jaime Soto released the following statement June 22:

"Religious institutions have long thrived in a democratic environment where they enjoyed the freedom to exercise their faith. The opportunity to practice faith in a public way reciprocated upon American society a diverse fabric of pious expressions that contributed to civic discourse and pushed the nation closer to the ideals of human dignity and social harmony. The abolition of slavery, the early growth of labor unions, and struggles of the civil rights movement all possessed a vibrant religious voice rooted in respectful civic engagement. The Catholic community has been a vital partner in these hard-won endeavors. We have thrived in a social environment that acknowledges the inalienable, God-given, nature of our religious freedom. With this freedom we have placed ourselves at the service our sisters and brothers fostering robust networks of charitable, educational, and health-care organizations, all of which contribute to the common good. Our faith makes us good neighbors as well as faithful citizens.

"For this reason, the decision of California's Department of Managed Health Care to violate those freedoms without any public consultation and then the lethargic 'denial of standing' by the Federal Office of Civil Rights points to an alarming trend: Government is claiming for itself the prerogative of granting inalienable freedoms. Unaccountable agencies will decide to whom and to what extent to grant civil liberties. The ruling by the Office of Civil Rights makes clear that the State of California can act with impunity in its treatment of essential human liberties. This is why we will continue to work at the federal level to strengthen the 'Weldon Amendment' and ensure the freedom of our Catholic institutions to do good."