

Remarks on Preventive Health Care Insurance Coverage and an Exchange With Reporters

February 10, 2012

Q. Here we go.

The President. Here we go.

Q. Here he is.

The President. Here I am.

Q. "Hello, everybody." You like that?

The President. That was pretty good.

Q. I've been working on that.

The President. Hello, everybody. [*Laughter*]

Q. "Hello, everybody." [*Laughter*]

The President. I was actually going to say good morning, but it—I guess it's afternoon by now.

As part of the health care reform law that I signed last year, all insurance plans are required to cover preventive care at no cost. That means free checkups, free mammograms, immunizations, and other basic services. We fought for this because it saves lives and it saves money for families, for businesses, for Government, for everybody. And that's because it's a lot cheaper to prevent an illness than to treat one.

We also accepted a recommendation from the experts at the Institute of Medicine that when it comes to women, preventive care should include coverage of contraceptive services such as birth control. In addition to family planning, doctors often prescribe contraception as a way to reduce the risks of ovarian and other cancers and treat a variety of different ailments. And we know that the overall cost of health care is lower when women have access to contraceptive services.

Nearly 99 percent of all women have relied on contraception at some point in their lives—99 percent. And yet more than half of all women between the ages of 18 and 34 have struggled to afford it. So for all these reasons, we decided to follow the judgment of the Nation's leading medical experts and make sure that free preventive care includes access to free contraceptive care.

Whether you're a teacher or a small-business woman or a nurse or a janitor, no woman's health should depend on who she is or where she works or how much money she makes. Every woman should be in control of the decisions that affect her own health—period. This basic principle is already the law in 28 States across the country.

Now, as we move to implement this rule, however, we've been mindful that there's another principle at stake here, and that's the principle of religious liberty, an inalienable right that is enshrined in our Constitution. As a citizen and as a Christian, I cherish this right.

In fact, my first job in Chicago was working with Catholic parishes in poor neighborhoods, and my salary was funded by a grant from an arm of the Catholic Church. And I saw that local churches often did more good for a community than a government program ever could, so I know how important the work that faith-based organizations do and how much impact they can have in their communities.

I also know that some religious institutions, particularly those affiliated with the Catholic Church, have a religious objection to directly providing insurance that covers contraceptive services for their employees. And that's why we originally exempted all churches from this requirement—an exemption, by the way, that eight States didn't already have.

And that's why, from the very beginning of this process, I spoke directly to various Catholic officials, and I promised that before finalizing the rule as it applied to them, we would spend the next year working with institutions like Catholic hospitals and Catholic universities to find an equitable solution that protects religious liberty and ensures that every woman has access to the care that she needs.

Now, after the many genuine concerns that have been raised over the last few weeks, as well as, frankly, the more cynical desire on the part of some to make this into a political football, it became clear that spending months hammering out a solution was not going to be an option, that we needed to move this faster. So last week, I directed the Department of Health and Human Services to speed up the process that had already been envisioned. We weren't going to spend a year doing this, we're going to spend a week or two doing this.

Today we've reached a decision on how to move forward. Under the rule, women will still have access to free preventive care that includes contraceptive services, no matter where they work. So that core principle remains. But if a woman's employer is a charity or a hospital that has a religious objection to providing contraceptive services as part of their health plan, the insurance company—not the hospital, not the charity—will be required to reach out and offer the woman contraceptive care free of charge, without copays and without hassles.

The result will be that religious organizations won't have to pay for these services, and no religious institution will have to provide these services directly. Let me repeat: These employers will not have to pay for or provide contraceptive services. But women who work at these institutions will have access to free contraceptive services just like other women, and they'll no longer have to pay hundreds of dollars a year that could go towards paying the rent or buying groceries.

Now, I've been confident from the start that we could work out a sensible approach here, just as I promised. I understand some folks in Washington may want to treat this as another political wedge issue, but it shouldn't be. I certainly never saw it that way. This is an issue where people of good will on both sides of the debate have been sorting through some very complicated questions to find a solution that works for everyone. With today's announcement, we've done that. Religious liberty will be protected, and a law that requires free preventive care will not discriminate against women.

Now, we live in a pluralistic society where we're not going to agree on every single issue or share every belief. That doesn't mean that we have to choose between individual liberty and basic fairness for all Americans. We are unique among nations for having been founded upon both these principles, and our obligation as citizens is to carry them forward. I have complete faith that we can do that.

Thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:15 p.m. in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room at the White House.

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