

Discrimination Against Catholic Humanitarian Services

USCCB Fact Sheet

For decades, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services (MRS) has carried out the commitment of the U.S. Bishops to serve and advocate for refugees, asylees, and other forced migrants, immigrants, and people on the move. **Special concern is given to the most vulnerable among these populations, such as the victims of human trafficking.** This commitment is rooted in the Gospel mandate that every person is to be welcomed as Christ Himself, and in the right of every human being to pursue the call to holiness.

MRS developed years of expertise in actively working to end human trafficking and protect those who have been exploited through trafficking. In 2006, MRS's Anti-Trafficking Services Program (ATSP) began administering a federal program to provide intensive case management to foreign national victims of human trafficking identified in the U.S. and its territories. In 2010, through its network of subcontracting agencies, ATSP helped survivors of human trafficking from 64 countries, with the largest number of survivors from India, Mexico, Thailand, the Philippines, and Haiti. Survivors had been trafficked on farms, in hotels and casinos, in private homes, in spas, and in other industries for the purposes of forced labor and/or sex trafficking.

In 2011, the federal government changed its contract specifications to require MRS to provide or refer for contraceptive and abortion "services" in violation of Catholic teaching. Consequently, the government refused to award a grant to MRS de-

spite MRS's earning a far higher objective score from the government's independent grant evaluators than two other organizations that were awarded grants. And those two scored so low that they were deemed unqualified.

Religious institutions should not be disqualified from a government contract based on religious belief, and they do not lose their religious freedom or identity upon entering such contracts. Yet, a federal court in Massachusetts, turning religious liberty on its head, declared that the First Amendment requires such a disqualification—that the government violates religious liberty by allowing Catholic organizations to participate in contracts in a manner consistent with their beliefs on contraception and abortion. Fortunately, in 2013, an appeals court vacated this terrible decision. But the possibility of similar suits in the future remains.

Is our most cherished freedom truly under threat?

Among many current challenges, the federal government has discriminated against Catholic humanitarian services based on their religious beliefs, even when those beliefs had no impact on performance. Religious liberty is more than freedom of worship; it includes our ability to make our contribution to the common good of all Americans without having to compromise our faith. Without religious liberty properly understood, all of us suffer, especially victims of human trafficking in need of important humanitarian services.



Office of Religious Liberty

www.usccb.org/freedom | Twitter: @USCCBFreedom

Text FREEDOM to 84576