

US, religious groups debate birth control coverage

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(AP)—The Obama administration on Friday urged a Supreme Court justice to stop blocking the new health care law's requirement that some religious-affiliated groups provide health insurance that includes birth control.

A group of Catholic nuns had challenged the requirement, and Justice Sonia Sotomayor issued the block on New Year's Eve, only hours before the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, went into effect.

The Justice Department wants Sotomayor to dissolve her decision.

It's the latest issue challenging President Barack Obama's signature legislation, which is aimed at giving millions of Americans health coverage. The law has been bitterly contested by many opposition Republicans.

Some religious organizations, especially Catholic ones, have objected to the requirement that most health insurance plans have to cover all approved contraceptives as preventive care for women, free of cost to the patient.

Churches and other houses of worship are exempt from the birth control requirement, but affiliated institutions that serve the general public are not. That includes charitable organizations, universities and hospitals.

In response to the objections, the government came up with a compromise that requires insurers to provide birth control coverage but allows the religious group to distance itself from that coverage.

A group of nuns in Denver who run nursing homes for the poor say signing the form that triggers the compromise makes them complicit in providing contraceptive coverage, and therefore violates their religious beliefs.

"Unfortunately, the federal government has started the new year the same way that it ended the old one: trying to bully nuns into violating their religious beliefs," said their lawyer, Mark Rienzi.

But Solicitor General Donald Verrilli said in court papers that nothing in the law will make those nuns pay for birth control for their employees.

It is not known when Sotomayor will make a decision.

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