

Feds Overhaul Conscience Rule for Providers

BY ALICIA AULT

The White House has issued a rule that would mostly overturn a regulation that was widely interpreted to allow health care providers to opt out of providing services such as contraception or abortion, or bar federal funding to those entities that did not accommodate providers' wishes to deny services.

The so-called conscience rule was issued in 2008 at the end of the Bush administration. The new regulation mostly rescinds that rule.

In issuing the new regulation, the Health and Human Services department said that it "supports clear and strong conscience protections for health care providers who are opposed to performing abortions," and that protections that have existed for decades will

continue to offer the same coverage.

The new rule will retain an enforcement mechanism set up under the 2008 regulation, but will mostly jettison the rest of it.

"Strong conscience laws make it clear that health care providers cannot be compelled to perform or assist in an abortion," said HHS in a statement. "Many of these strong conscience laws have been in existence for more than 30

years. The rule being issued today builds on these laws by providing a clear enforcement process."

The agency proposed rescinding the Bush rule in March 2009 and received more than 300,000 comments on the proposed rule. More than 97,000 supported a rescinding of the 2008 rule, about 187,000 opposed any revision, and the rest were of various opinions.

The rule went into effect March 18. ■

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