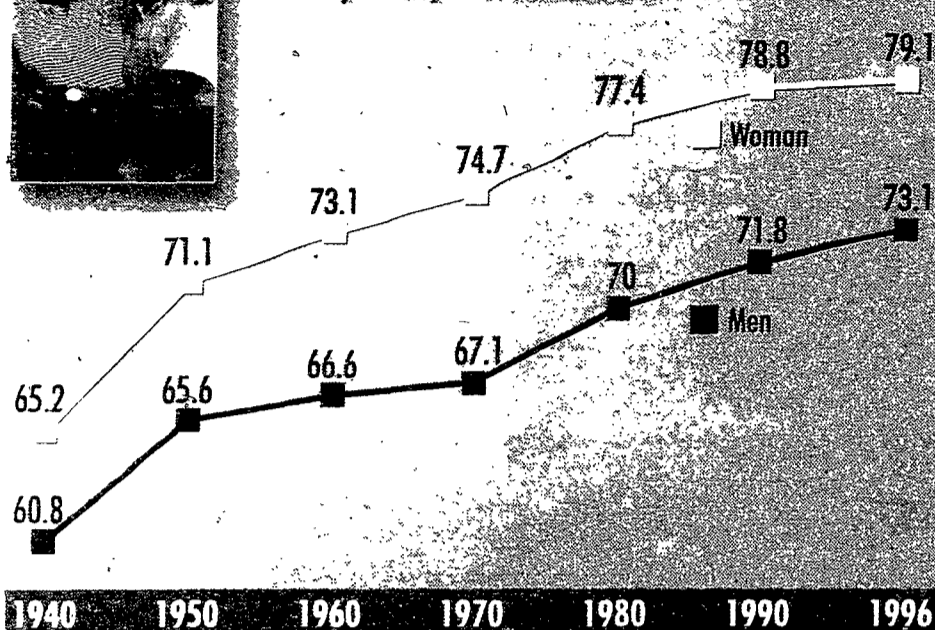


# WORLD & NATION

## Living Longer



Women and men in the United States are living longer, although women on average have longer lives. Life expectancy at birth 1940-96



Source: National Center for Health Statistics

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## Contraception coverage becomes national issue

By Patricia Zapor  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — If you haven't heard them already, coming soon to a legislature near you will be some fairly altruistic-sounding arguments for requiring employers to pay for contraceptives if they cover prescription drugs.

• "Women spend 68 percent more than men in out-of-pocket expenses for health care, a large part of which is the cost of birth control."

• "Contraception prevents unintended pregnancies and therefore reduces demand for abortion."

• "Health plans cover the cost for Viagra, which improves men's sex lives. But by not covering the cost of birth control, which could make women's sex lives less complicated, they're discriminating against women."

• "It's not about the morality of contraceptives, it's a health care issue."

Those arguments were raised as the District of Columbia Council July 11 voted to require all employers in the city that cover prescriptions as a benefit to include contraceptives. They also have been heard around the country in the last two years, as dozens of states have passed or considered similar laws.

The Archdiocese of Washington was among the organizations that fought unsuccessfully to get the D.C. Council to approve a "conscience clause" exemption for employers with a religious objection to paying for contraceptives.

Among the archdiocese's arguments for seeking the exemption was that the government should not be telling churches that they have to pay for something that runs counter to a basic church teaching.

"What we are fighting is 'health-care totalitarianism,' whereby the government makes all health care decisions and forces its will on religious organizations," said Washington Auxiliary Bishop William E. Lori in a letter urging Catholics to contact the mayor about the issue. "That's bad for

the church, but it's also bad for democracy."

Mayor Anthony Williams had not indicated if he would sign the bill, but before he got the chance, Congress stepped in.

With its quasi-federal status, the District's budget must be approved by Congress. On July 20, the House Appropriations Committee approved an amendment to D.C.'s budget that would negate the July 11 law and require that any future employer mandate for contraceptive coverage include exceptions for religious beliefs and moral convictions.

The amendment still must be accepted by the full House, but members of both parties in Congress have been vocal in arguing the District should include an exemption.

In 1998 Maryland became the first state to require coverage for contraceptives in prescription insurance plans. Maryland, like most of the 20 or so states with similar laws, includes a clause allowing religious exemptions.

But as those who sought a conscience clause in D.C.'s law learned, there's a strong movement to prevent exemptions or to make them as narrow as possible.

Mark Chopko, general counsel for the U.S. Catholic Conference, said he sees a "concerted, organized effort" around the country to try to force Catholic institutions to participate in covering contraceptives for employees.

"It's not a coincidence that virtually the same legislation is popping up around the country," Chopko said. "And when pressed for an exemption, we hear the same kinds of explanations for why they don't want one, down to using the same words."

Richard Doerflinger, associate director for policy development of the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, noted that in an October speech, Planned Parenthood President Gloria Feldt cited access to family planning services and contraceptive coverage as the top legislative priority of the organization.

"In over half the states, bills on this were introduced almost simultaneously," Doerflinger said. "This isn't something that would have occurred to all those legislators all on their own."

He points to literature from abortion-supporting organizations that spells out exactly what words to use in arguing against conscience clauses.

He cited one letter that recommends offering this narrow description of who should be entitled to an exemption: "A religious institution that has as its primary purpose inculcating religious doctrine."

Using that definition, most church institutions, including Catholic schools would not be exempt, he said. "Nothing would be covered except maybe individual parishes."



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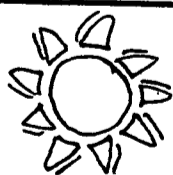
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