

HEALTH

Compromise Keeps Birth Control Coverage

Free preventive care will be paid by insurers

(AP)-- President Barack Obama, struggling with a political storm that has threatened to keep building, announced a birth control compromise Friday that he said would both protect religious liberties and ensure that the nation's women have access to free contraception.

After weeks of growing controversy, Obama backed off a recently announced requirement for religious-affiliated employers to provide free birth control coverage even if it runs counter to their beliefs. Instead, workers at such institutions will be able to get free contraception directly from health insurance companies.

"Religious liberty will be pro-



President Barack Obama and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelious appear before the media Friday to announce a compromise that gives religious employers a way of not having to pay for free contraceptive insurance coverage for workers. (AP photo)

tected, and a law that requires free preventive care will not discriminate against women," Obama said in an appearance in the White House briefing room.

"I understand some folks in Washington want to treat this as another political wedge issue. But it shouldn't be. I certainly never saw it that way," Obama said. "This is an

issue where people of good will on both sides of the debate have been sorting through some very complicated questions."

Women will still get guaranteed access to birth control without co-pays or premiums no matter where they work, a provision of Obama's health care law that he insisted must remain. But religious universities and hospitals that see contraception as an unconscionable violation of their faith can refuse to cover it, and insurance companies will then have to step in to do so.

The White House did get the backing of one important Catholic organization, as well as a prominent women's group.

"The framework developed has responded to the issues we identified that needed to be fixed," Sister Carol Keehan, president of the Catholic Health Association, a trade group representing Catholic hospitals that

had fought against the birth control requirement, said in a statement.

Planned Parenthood also backed the revisions, saying the Obama administration was still committed to ensuring all women have access to birth control coverage, no matter where they work.

By keeping free contraception for employers at religious workplaces -- but providing a different way to do it -- Obama was able to assert he gave no ground on the basic principle of full preventive care that matters most to Obama.

Yet, it also was clear that the president felt he had no choice but to retreat on a three-week-old policy in the face of a fierce political furor that showed no signs of cooling.

Officials said Obama has the legal authority to order insurance companies to provide free contraception coverage directly to workers. He will demand it in a new rule.

Women Urged to Take Action on Heart Health

Miss Black USA raises awareness

February is American Heart Month and Black History Month, and Miss Black USA 2011 Ocielgia Gibson is urging women to learn



Ocielgia Gibson

the signs of heart disease and make healthier choices to fight back against this highly preventable disease.

Gibson is no stranger to the seriousness of heart disease. She lost her father to cardiovascular disease when she was a child.

"Heart disease is serious business," Gibson says. "I know personally the devastating effects. Being able to be an advocate for heart disease awareness now is the greatest tribute I can pay to my dad."

Dr. Dawn Carroll, the Miss Black USA Pageant's official physician, believes that fighting heart disease starts with girls before they reach adulthood. "If we reach women at a much younger age, we can prevent the disease later," Dr. Carroll says.

This is in line with the concerns of First Lady Michelle Obama, who started the non-profit organization

Let's Move! to raise awareness about the childhood obesity epidemic and take strides to end it.

According to the organization, a third of all American children are overweight or obese, and in African American and Hispanic communities, the epidemic is even worse. Almost 40 percent of African American and Hispanic children are overweight.

In addition to advocating for heart health, Gibson has also started her own non-profit organization, which helps young girls learn how to make healthier choices. More than a Pretty Face, Inc. reaches out to both girls dealing with self-esteem issues and not making healthy choices. Gibson runs a mentor program and holds summits and workshops for girls to inspire them to

change their lives and make better decisions about their health and their lives.

Ocielgia Gibson is the first Miss Black Texas to win the national title of Miss Black USA. Gibson is a classically trained pianist who began training at a young age and then went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts in Music Education from Texas Women's University.

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