

Preserve religious freedom in adoptions

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Thousands of Michigan children are in need of a family, and nonprofit organizations — specifically faith-based groups — have played a pioneering role in finding these young people homes.

To preserve the presence of these agencies, the Michigan Catholic Conference is strongly urging state lawmakers to pass several bills that would protect the religious liberties of faith-based groups when placing children in either a foster family or a permanent home.

Roughly 14,000 children are in foster care at any given time and some 3,000 of these kids are available for adoption, according to Michigan's Department of Human Services.

Catholic agencies oversee about 10 percent of the adoptions in Michigan. And the Catholic Conference estimates that 45 percent of foster care placement is handled by nonprofit groups and around half that number are specifically faith-based groups.

Two bills introduced in the House late last month would prevent situations where these religious nonprofits would be forced to place children in homes that clash with their beliefs. This is largely a pre-emptive move in case the state ever legalizes gay marriage or civil unions. Reps. Andrea LaFontaine, R-Columbus Township, and Ken Kurtz, R-Coldwater, are the main sponsors of the bills.

The legislation would offer legal protection for agencies to abide by their religious missions, according to the Catholic Conference. Catholic agencies in Illinois, Massachusetts and San Francisco, for example, have chosen to close rather than breach their beliefs.

That's a loss to the children and families who benefit from the wide array of services such groups provide.

"Faith-based adoption and foster care agencies, Catholic Charities for example, are prevalent in communities throughout the state," said Tom Hickson, vice president of public policy and advocacy with the Michigan Catholic Conference, in a statement. "It is imperative that the state continues to maintain and strengthen diversity in child placement."

Some critics of the legislation claim it would unfairly target gays interested in adopting. But the bills don't prohibit other agencies from placing children in these homes, and the majority of adoptions are handled by secular agencies. The law simply offers security to faith-based groups to continue providing a valuable service.

These bills are similar to another that's been sitting in the Senate the past few months. This legislation, sponsored by Sen. John Moolenaar, R-Midland, would shield health care workers and hospitals from violating their conscience.

Michigan already has a law that prevents health care facilities and employees from having to participate in abortions. This bill would expand protections to other elective services, including selling contraceptives.

Our country has traditionally placed great value on individual liberty, and state lawmakers ought to do what they can to preserve those freedoms.

