



Amrita Singh
State Legislative Counsel

(202) 466-3234 x226
(202) 898-0955 (fax)
americansunited@au.org

1901 L Street, NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036

Testimony of
Amrita Singh,
State Legislative Counsel,
Americans United for Separation of Church and State
in Opposition to
HB 4188, HB 4189, and HB 4190, Creating a Religious Exemption for Child Placing
Agencies
Senate Committee on Families, Seniors, and Human Services
April 21, 2015

On behalf of its Michigan members and supporters, Americans United for Separation of Church and State urges you to oppose HB 4188, HB 4189, and HB 4190, bills that would provide child placing agencies with a broad right to refuse to place children in adoptive homes if that placement is contrary to the agency's religious or moral convictions. Passage of this bill could lead to discrimination against parents seeking to adopt and could burden a child's right to be adopted into a stable home according to the best interests of the child. A broad exemption such as this would place the beliefs of the agency above the needs of the child; therefore, these bills must be rejected.

This Exemption is Unconstitutionally Broad

Although the government may offer religious accommodations even where it is not required to do so by the Constitution,¹ the state's ability to provide religious accommodations is not unlimited: "At some point, accommodation may devolve into an unlawful fostering of religion."² In *Texas Monthly, Inc. v. Bullock*,³ the Supreme Court explained that legislative exemptions for religious organizations that exceed free exercise requirements will be upheld only when they do not impose "substantial burdens on nonbeneficiaries" or they are designed to prevent "potentially serious encroachments on protected religious freedoms." To meet the confines of the Establishment Clause, "an accommodation must be measured so that it does not override other significant interests."⁴ It may not place "unyielding weight" on the religious interest "over all other interests," including the interests of child placing agencies.⁵

This Exemption Would Burden Adoptees' Best Interests

However, placing the interests of one group over another is exactly what HB 4188, HB 4189, and HB 4190 seek to do. These bills prioritize the religious views of child placing agencies above the

¹ Of course, in some instances exemptions may be constitutionally permissible but unwise public policy.

² *Corporation of the Presiding Bishop v. Amos*, 483 U.S. 327, 334-35 (1986) (internal quotation marks omitted).

³ 480 U.S. 1, 18 n. 8 (1989).

⁴ *Cutter v. Wilkinson*, 544 U.S. 709 (2005).

⁵ *Estate of Thornton v. Caldor, Inc.*, 472 U.S. 703, 704, (1985).

best interests of the child. This contradicts state law and generally accepted standards, which require both the courts and placing agencies to prioritize the child's best interest⁶ when placing a child in a foster or adoptive home. Section 710.21a of the Michigan Probate Code states that "[i]f conflicts arise between the rights of the adoptee and the rights of another [party to the adoption], the rights of the adoptee shall be paramount."

Yet, even the text of HB 4188 recognizes that the bill's religious exemption would create friction with the child's best interest standard. It states that the refusal of an agency because the placement "conflicts with the child placing agency's sincerely held religious belief" does not constitute a determination that the proposed adoption is not in the best interests of the child. Therefore, these bills would facilitate a blatant contradiction of public policy by allowing a child placing agency to reject an adoptive home, even if it is in the child's best interest. Accordingly, the exemption created by these bills would endanger a child's right to a suitable placement and undermine the state's policy of putting children's interests first. For these reasons, HB 4188, HB 4189, and HB 4190 must be rejected.

This Exemption Permits Government-funded Discrimination

HB 4188, HB 4189, and HB 4190 would allow agencies to use religious doctrine as the defining criterion for selecting adoptive parents even when these agencies accept government funds. These bills would enable government funding for agencies that discriminate against potential adoptive parents for any reason, as long the agency claims the discrimination is based upon its religious beliefs. For example, an adoption agency could refuse to place a child in an otherwise stable home because the prospective parents were unmarried, were a same sex couple, or were adherents to a religion adverse with the agency's beliefs. Allowing government money to flow to these institutions without holding them to non-discrimination laws is a clear violation of one of the central principles of our country's constitutional order: "the Constitution does not permit the State to aid discrimination."⁷

Moreover, these bills fail to safeguard taxpayer funds from flowing to organizations that contract with the government to provide services, but then refuse to fulfill their obligations under the contract.⁸ The bills prohibit a state or local government entity from withholding a grant, contract, or program participation due to the child placing agency's religious

⁶ The Child Custody Act defines a placement made in the "best interests of the child" to include factors such as: the emotional bond between the child and the parties involved in the adoption; the ability of the adoptive parties to provide a loving and affectionate environment as well as a stable and permanent home; the health of the parties; the school, home, and community of the parties; and the reasonable preference of the child. MICH. COMP. LAWS § 722.23 (1993).

⁷ *Norwood v. Harrison*, 413 U.S. 455, 465-66 (1973).

⁸ In a similar example, the Obama Administration recently decided not to renew a grant with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) for human trafficking services. The Administration did so because the USCCB refused to serve or even refer victims of human trafficking for reproductive health services, such as contraception, sterilization, or abortion. These services, however, are critical to these victims. Sara Israelsen-Hartley, *Religious Discrimination Alleged by Catholic Group That Lost Federal Funding to Stop Human Trafficking*, DESERT NEWS (Nov. 4, 2011) available at <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700194644/Religious-discrimination-alleged-by-Catholic-group-that-lost-federal-funding-to-stop-human.html?pg=all>.

objection. It is entirely plausible that an agency would receive government funding to provide children with placements according to the best interests of those children, but then fail to carry out its mission because it objects to the religion of the potential parents, despite it being an otherwise suitable placement. For example, a government funded agency could refuse to place a child with a potential family because it objects to their practice of Islam, that one of the parents was previously divorced, or that an older sibling was born before the parents were married. Taxpayer funds should not fund services contingent on a religious litmus test – nor should it fund programs that use religion to deny essential services to those who need them.

Although Americans United supports accommodations to protect religious freedoms, the exemptions in HB 4188, HB 4189, and HB 4190 would impermissibly create state-sponsored discrimination and would burden children's rights to be placed in adoptive homes according to their best interests. Accordingly, I urge you to oppose HB 4188, HB 4189, and HB 4190.