

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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November 4, 2020

The Honorable Dr. Mark T. Esper
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

The Honorable Emily W. Murphy
Administrator
General Services Administration
1800 F Street, NW
Washington, DC 20405-0001

The Honorable Jim Bridenstine
Administrator
National Aeronautics and Space Administration
300 E. Street SW, Suite 5R30
Washington, DC 20546-0001

Re: Comments opposing proposed rule entitled Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance

Document Number: 2020-17551
RIN: 9000-AN62

Dear Secretary Esper, Administrator Murphy, and Administrator Bridenstine:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to oppose the proposed rule, Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance (PLGHA) by the Department of Defense, General Services Administration, and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 33,000 members across the country. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

FFRF strongly opposes this effort to expand the Mexico City Policy. The Mexico City Policy already denies U.S. funding in the form of grants and cooperative agreements to foreign non-governmental organizations that provide abortion care or abortion counseling. The proposed rule would broaden this policy to also include groups that receive aid through government contracts. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, contracts make up about 40 percent of global health aid.¹ This means that millions of women around the globe will be denied crucial

reproductive health resources, information and services.

The Mexico City Policy, which has originally enacted in 1984 by President Ronald Reagan, restricts foreign non-governmental organizations that receive U.S. aid for family planning from “perform[ing] or actively promot[ing] abortion as a method of family planning,” as well as providing information or referrals for abortions, lobbying for the liberalization of abortion laws, and conducting public information campaigns about abortion as a method of family planning.² And while the Mexico City Policy’s intention is to prohibit abortion, research has found no evidence that the policy achieves that.

Instead, research shows that the Mexico City Policy lacks any public health value and is harmful to communities. In fact, a 2011 study in rural Ghana found a 12 percent increase in pregnancies and an additional 200,000 abortions. A 2017-2018 study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) determined that many family planning organizations had to significantly reduce their operations and staff and, consequently, the services to millions of women and families who depend on their education, resources, and treatment. For instance, a large non-U.S. organization in Uganda had to curb mobile outreach initiatives that provided contraceptives to women in public health facilities while another organization had to end family planning education programs to the community.³ The proposed PLGHA would undoubtedly result in even more shutdowns of vital health care services.

Meanwhile, healthcare professionals, researchers and specialists have determined that abortion is an extremely safe procedure. A 2018 study by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) found that serious complications from abortions are rare regardless of abortion procedure method.⁴ A study conducted by Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health (ANSIRH) determined that *less than a quarter of one percent* of abortions result in a major complication.⁵ Indeed, it is barriers to abortion, like the Mexico City Policy and the proposed PLGHA, that prevent safe and effective care. In fact, a study published in the research journal *BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health* found that the denial of legal abortion services may have serious consequences on a woman’s health and well-being as a result of carrying an unhealthy pregnancy to term, seeking unsafe illegal abortions, and health consequences of childbirth, which is 14 times riskier than an abortion.⁶

Beyond health consequences, the proposed rule violates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), particularly Articles 18 and 19. Article 18 of the UDHR states that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.” This freedom of religion does not grant the United States the right to impose religiously rooted anti-abortion sentiments onto other countries, including those seeking financial aid for much-needed family planning programs and reproductive healthcare services. Furthermore, Article 19 of the UDHR states that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions

without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”⁷ Therefore, the Mexico City Policy and its proposed extension, PLGHA, violates Article 19 by denying access to information about abortion, including services and resources. Simply put, it is inhumane to censor critical healthcare information from anyone and reckless to codify that through this proposed rule.

FFRF opposes the proposed rule in its entirety and urges the Department of Defense, General Services Administration, and National Aeronautics and Space Administration to abandon it and instead stand up for evidence-based medicine and permanently repeal the Mexico City Policy and reject PLGHA. This would end the senseless ban of U.S. foreign assistance to organizations that provide abortion care, access and information.

A secular nation like the United States should not allow the religious motivations of the few to dictate to health care of women across the globe.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Annie Laurie Gaylor Dan Barker".

Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-Presidents
Freedom From Religion Foundation

1. *Trump Administration Proposed Regulation to Further Expand Mexico City Policy*. (2020, September 15). KFF. <https://www.kff.org/news-summary/trump-administration-proposes-regulation-to-further-expand-mexico-city-policy/>
2. *The Mexico City Policy: An Explainer*. (2020, June 29). KFF. <https://www.kff.org/global-health-policy/fact-sheet/mexico-city-policy-explainer/>
3. Ahmed, Z. (2020, April 28). *The Unprecedented Expansion of the Global Gag Rule: Trampling Rights*. Guttmacher Institute. <https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2020/04/unprecedented-expansion-global-gag-rule-trampling-rights-health-and-free-speech>
4. *The Quality of Abortion Care Depends on Where a Woman Lives, Says One of Most Comprehensive Reviews of Research on Safety and Quality of Abortion Care in the U.S.* (2018, March 16). National Academies of Science, Engineering, Medicine. <https://www.nationalacademies.org/news/2018/03/the-quality-of-abortion-care-depends-on-where-a-woman-lives-says-one-of-most-comprehensive-reviews-of-research-on-safety-and-quality-of-abortion-care-in-the-us>
5. *Safety of abortion in the United States*. (2014, December). ANSIRH. <https://www.ansirh.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/safetybrief12-14.pdf>
6. Pittman, G. (2012, January 23). *Abortion safer than giving birth: study*. U.S. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-abortion/abortion-safer-than-giving-birth-study-idUSTRE80M2BS20120123>
7. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. (1948). United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>