

CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE

IN GOOD CONSCIENCE

February 21, 2019

Chicago City Council
121 North LaSalle Street
Chicago, IL 60602

Dear Aldermen,

For more than forty years, Catholics for Choice has served around the world as a voice for the majority of Catholics across the United States—including the more than 2 million Catholics in Chicago—who support access to comprehensive reproductive care, including abortion. We strive to be an expression of the lived experiences of everyday faithful Catholics—lifting the voices of the majority of faithful prochoice Catholics who believe we must protect a woman’s agency in moral decision making. Catholics for Choice works at the state, local and national level to raise these voices and to advocate for policies that allow all individuals to make their own moral decisions about their health and their lives.

We write to express our deep concern, shared by our allies across the state, over the recent City Council vote to allocate \$5.6 million in taxpayer funding to Presence Health Care. While Catholic healthcare facilities provide quality care in a number of areas to Chicagoland residents, the experiences of those seeking reproductive health services in Catholic hospitals are deeply troubling. It is a critical element of due diligence for local policymakers to be aware of the shortcomings of Catholic hospitals and healthcare systems, especially in regards to reproductive healthcare.

Presence Health Care adheres to the *Ethical and Religious Directives on Catholic Health Care*—a set of religious-based rules written and enforced by the Catholic bishops, *not* medical professionals. These *Directives* allow women to be treated as second-class citizens in facilities supported by public dollars. This is wrong. At a time when your colleagues in Springfield are working to expand access to reproductive healthcare across the state, it is especially objectionable that the City of Chicago would turn a blind eye when making funding decisions that leave so many vulnerable residents without access to critical care.

Today, Catholic hospitals treat one out of every six hospital patients in the United States. Yet, few patients understand the degree to which the bishops determine what healthcare options are available at such facilities. The *Directives* forbid doctors from providing modern forms of contraception (including tubal ligations and vasectomies), in vitro fertilization, and abortion — even in cases of rape or incest. They restrict treatment for ectopic pregnancies. Patients cannot benefit from embryonic stem cell research. Sexual assault victims cannot access emergency contraception until it can be proven that they are not pregnant. Patients’ advance medical directives for end of life decisions can also be overruled.

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Moreover, Catholic hospitals across the country receive billions in taxpayer funding. Chicago has 16 Catholic hospitals that serve 2.3 million patients annually—representing more than one-fourth of patients served in Illinois’ health centers each year. Yet these facilities practice blatant discrimination against those who do not follow the dictates of the bishops in these matters, Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Catholic teaching reveres individual conscience as the final arbiter in moral decision making. We are called by our faith to follow our conscience when we make moral decisions about our lives and deeply respect the right of others to do the same. As such, the vast majority of Catholics support each woman’s ability to make personal choices that are right for herself and her family—including whether to become or remain pregnant—according to her own beliefs and based on her own conscience. Catholics in Chicago want their policymakers to ensure that protection extends to every patient no matter where they choose to seek care.

These *Directives* do exactly the opposite, denying patients the right to follow their own conscience in making health decisions in place of restrictions based on religious rules. The restrictions dictated by the *Directives* are most devastating for poor women and underserved communities, as they have fewer places to turn for the healthcare they need. They often also run contrary to providers’ professional ethics to always put their patients’ care first. Catholic healthcare systems’ disregard for the conscience of the patients seeking services and the best judgment of the medical professionals eager to provide optimal treatments is abhorrent and unacceptable.

Catholics for Choice proudly stands with those who work to ensure that women, and men, all over Chicago are able to access the reproductive health services they need. We invite you to read our comprehensive report [“Is Your Healthcare Compromised?”](#) to better understand the disturbing consequences at Catholic healthcare systems, like Presence, resulting from their adherence to the *Directives*.

We are grateful for the members of the City Council who voted against the increased funding for Presence Health and encourage the Council to seek additional information on Catholic healthcare facilities and the *Directives* that govern them. Catholics for Choice is happy to be a resource to any of the aldermen, or their staff, who might like to know more. Please contact our domestic program director, Glenn Northern, at 202-986-6093 or gnorthern@catholicsforchoice.org for further information on this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jon O'Brien". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping "J" and "B".

Jon O'Brien

President