

# Legislators debate contraception coverage

By Dana Carlson - Capital News Service

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RICHMOND-- Delegate Bob Marshall, R-Manassas, defended religious freedom at Virginia Commonwealth University in a debate against Sen. John Edwards, D-Roanoke, regarding the Affordable Care Act provision requiring employers to provide insurance plans with contraceptive coverage.

At the debate Marshall declared parts of the Affordable Care Act unconstitutional under the establishment clause of the First Amendment and the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom.

The focus of the debate was House Bill 18, one of a series of bills Marshall proposed to the General Assembly to prevent contraception from being mandated in insurance plans.

HB 18 required that all businesses or organizations offering insurance policies that include coverage for contraception services offer an identical plan in which no such coverage is offered.

HB18, House Bill 19 and House Bill 20, all containing similar language, died in various committees.

"Laws have always provided for conscientious objection; why not here?" Marshall asked. "Is the requirement that everyone be involved in abortion pills some mandate of a religion or the Constitution?"

Virginia presently gives employers the option to include contraception coverage within their health plans, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

"The state has a compelling interest to make sure everyone is covered and a compelling interest to make sure women are treated equally and public health is protected," Edwards said. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation Survey, 85 percent of large firm employers offer contraceptive coverage.

"A secular, for-profit organization has no business telling their employees that they cannot have what everyone else is entitled to have," Edwards said. "It's a slippery slope if a person who runs a company can decide for their employees what kind of health care they are allowed access to."

"If you want birth control, go to Wal-Mart," Marshall said. Marshall said he didn't believe in paying for contraception with his tax money and compared the expense of birth control to the cost of buying a cup or two of Starbucks coffee each month.

The Department of Health and Human Services modified the religious employer exemption to the Affordable Care Act in June to simplify the requirements an organization must meet to be exempt from offering contraception coverage.

According to the United Healthcare website, religious entities can be exempt from the requirement by filling out a form that designates them as a non-profit organization such as a church, other house of worship, a convention or association of churches, or a group participating exclusively in religious activities of any religious order.

"Religious freedom goes both ways," Edwards said. "It's not only your right to express your religious views, it's your right not to have someone else impose their religious views on you."

The debate was sponsored by the First Freedom Center, Historic Polegreen Church Foundation, and the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University.