

PRESS CONFERENCE TEXT

PENNY WIEGERT: Good afternoon. Thank you all for coming. I would like to introduce to you members of the administration here in the Rockford Diocese relevant to this announcement.

INTRODUCTIONS:

PENNY: In its early history, many Catholic Charities agencies, including the one here in the Diocese of Rockford-- which serves 11 counties here across the northern part of Illinois--served as orphanages to care for the most vulnerable children in their communities. Today, Catholic Charities continues that tradition of caring for children through foster care and adoption services. Our local services to children and families in this regard date back 100 years and more.

Catholic Charities, like many other private agencies in Illinois, recruit and train foster parents to be licensed by the state of Illinois. Children are then placed with those trained and licensed foster parents. Caseworkers from Catholic Charities provide the monitoring, case work and social services to the children. Catholic Charities is funded by the state for these services. The quality, compassion and professionalism with which these services are provided are guided by the mission, vision and teaching of the Catholic Church.

In fact, the official mission of Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Rockford is this...*Catholic Charities continues the ministry of Jesus in faithfulness to the Magisterium of the Church. Our mission is to serve God for the common good with compassion, dignity and respect; to assist people in achieving a degree of independence consonant with their human dignity; and to work in solidarity with the Church and other people of good will in advocating for justice.*

On June 1, 2011 the Illinois Religious Freedom Protection and Civil Unions Act will take effect. This new law may allow unmarried cohabitating couples, whether same-sex or opposite sex, to apply for adoptions and licenses to become foster parents. As you may know, the Catholic Church does not condone same-sex unions or unmarried cohabitation between individuals of the opposite sex. We believe in the natural order of marriage and the Sacrament of Matrimony between one man and one woman. We also believe and promote the optimal God-given privilege of every child to be reared in a safe and loving family with a committed and loving male father and female mother whenever possible.

Catholic Charities and other religious agencies implored the State of Illinois to allow their agencies to refer civil union couples to other adoption and foster care agencies so as to not violate the moral teachings of their faith.

Tragically, that did not happen. The state legislature failed to pass an explicit amendment exempting religious entities from the application of the civil unions law in its state-funded adoption and foster care programs. Despite the tireless efforts of the state's Catholic Charities directors including Mr. Vonch, and the lobbying efforts of the Catholic Conference of Illinois, the exemption failed.

Because of this failure and the anticipated legal challenges it will present to our free exercise of religion, the Diocese of Rockford is forced to permanently discontinue all state-funded adoption and foster care operations as of June 1, 2011.

FRANK VONCH: Because of this action, our agency will begin transitioning families from the care of Catholic Charities as directed by DCFS. This morning, I had the very heartbreaking task of informing 58 dedicated foster care and adoption workers that their professional services will no longer be required due to this closure. These workers are spread through-out our offices in two regions—one in the East with offices in Aurora, Elgin and McHenry. Our western Region has offices in Rockford, Freeport, Belvidere and Sterling.

Our caseworkers do this work **not just because it's their job, but because it is their calling.** The children and families they serve are just an extension of their commitment to our mission, which serving children is at its basic core, so it is a very grave loss for them as well as for everyone involved with charities.

Beginning today, employees will spend the next weeks preparing to transition their cases to the care of other agencies. We currently serve about 350 children and 191 foster families. Currently, as I just mentioned, Catholic Charities has seven offices across the 11-county diocese. When this transition and redefinition of services is complete, we will have one office in Rockford and one in Aurora and one in McHenry.

Earlier this morning, the affected employees along with all diocesan clergy, parishes and schools were informed of this unfortunate, but necessary action. While we understand leaving this work will be very painful for our client families, employees, volunteers, donors and prayerful supporters, we can no longer contract with the State of Illinois whose laws would force us to participate in activity offensive to the moral teachings of the church—teachings which compel us to do this work in the first place.

Services no longer offered by Catholic Charities include:

- State-funded Foster Care including counseling of foster children and special programming
- State-funded Adoption Services including adoption counseling
- State-funded parenting classes
- State-funded extended family support program

All non-state funded services will not be affected. Those include

- Private adoption
- School counseling
- Private family and marriage counseling
- Bilingual Outreach Program
- Outreach and Emergency Services
- Long Term Care Ombudsman Program

Immigration and Refugee Services

Physician Referral Services

Crisis Pregnancy

St. Elizabeth Catholic Community Center including its Early Childhood Education/preschool program

I, along with my colleagues here today, will now take any questions you may have.