

Family Research Council

14th Annual Values Voter Summit

Remarks by Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar

**Speaker:
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Secretary,
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

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(Applause.)

SECRETARY ALEX AZAR: Thank you. Thank you. (Applause.) Oh, thank you. Thank you all. Thank you so much. (Applause.) Thank you. Thank you so much. And Tony, thank you for that kind introduction, and thank you all for that incredibly warm welcome.

You know, the voices and commitment provided by Americans of faith are so vitally important in our public square. In working to build a healthier, stronger America, we simply can't succeed without the help of Americans of faith. Today I want to take a few moments to update you on some of the important work that Tony mentioned that we've been doing at HHS on some of the issues that I know you care about.

HHS's mission is to enhance and protect the health and wellbeing of all Americans. That's an incredibly broad and exciting mission. It means everything from helping Americans recover from addiction and protecting our country from infectious diseases to lowering prescription drug prices, supporting our seniors by protecting Medicare, and helping Americans achieve independence through finding work.

All of these efforts are of real importance to President Trump. He cares about protecting and improving Americans' lives.

Under this administration, we've also gone about our mission with a principle in mind: all of this work must be approached with an appreciation for the dignity of every human life and with respect for the conscience rights of every American. (Applause.) In fact, under President Trump we put it right in our agency's five-year strategic plan. HHS is dedicated to serving, quote, "all Americans from conception to natural death." (Cheers, applause.)

We have the privilege of protecting life and conscience in so many ways because of the sheer breadth of what HHS does, all of the statutes we enforce and all of the programs that we run. My friend Vice President Pence has a joke that he likes to tell about the tax code, that the IRS's code is 10 times the size of the Bible but with none of the good news. (Laughter.) I'm afraid to say that if you put all of HHS's statutes and regulations together, that stack of paper would probably make the tax code look like the Book of Jude. (Laughter.) So today I won't be able to run through all of the programs or all of the accomplishments of our administration at HHS, but I hope you'll see that we've been hard at work for you.

I want to begin with one particularly proud moment for this administration. As many of you know, last month President Trump delivered a bold message at the U.N. It's a bit of an annual tradition. He laid out the frightening state of religious freedom around the world and called on all nations to do more to protect persons of faith. As an Arab Christian whose own family knew real religious persecution within this past century, I'm especially grateful to be part of what the entire Trump administration is doing to protect religious minorities around the world.

Unfortunately, in international circles not only have threats to religious freedom often been ignored, but the sacred importance of the family and the right to life are often disrespected,

too. As somebody who has now represented the United States on health matters around the world for almost two decades, I can tell you it's discouraging and disheartening to see how international organizations and wealthy nations can bully countries on matters of fundamental importance like the sacred role of the family and the right to life.

So earlier this year Secretary Pompeo and I publicly called upon the world's nations to stand up against this kind of anti-life advocacy. We did in the leadup to a major meeting at the U.N. General Assembly where we anticipated an effort to suggest that all nations ought to view abortion as a necessary element of healthcare and to claim that abortion is a fundamental human right. The eventual declaration from that meeting included terms that without caveats can and have been used to bully lower-income nations regarding their policies on issues like abortion.

So did any of you happen to hear what we ended up doing at the U.N. in response? Anyone? Following President Trump's lead, we gathered a coalition of 21 nations representing more than 1.3 billion people and four of the 10 largest nations on Earth, and together we took a stand. (Applause.) We delivered a clear message: each nation has a sovereign right to protect the lives of its own citizens, and protect the role of the family within their own borders. (Applause.)

We made it unequivocally clear: Under President Trump, the United States will never tolerate language that implies there is an international right to abortion. (Applause.) We will boldly proclaim that there is no such right. We will hold U.N. agencies accountable when they drift into such advocacy, and we will continue to protect life around the world. (Applause.)

We've worked closely with Secretary Pompeo and the State Department to implement President Trump's restored and expanded Mexico City policy, one of the president's first actions when he took office. Under that policy, protecting life in global health assistance, we've worked to ensure that HHS' global health assistance is not provided to foreign, non-governmental organizations that provide or promote abortion as a method of family planning. The Mexico City policy has always attracted all kinds of criticism, with claims about how it would imperil the important work that we do overseas. Yet when we implemented the expanded version of the policy, HHS only saw one grantee drop out of our programs, and we were able to find another provider to fill the gap without any interruption in services whatsoever. (Applause.)

Another interesting area where this administration has fought for life is our scientific work. We've ensured that the life-saving scientific research that we support is not done in a way that disrespects life. This administration is proud to recognize that, as all of you well know, you can be pro-life and pro-science at the same time. (Applause.)

One of the exciting signs of that commitment is the president's success in passing Right to Try. Every year of life, every month or day for someone struggling with a terminal illness is precious. The president recognizes that, which is why he fought for and signed legislation that will open up more opportunities for patients who are diagnosed with life-threatening diseases to access new experimental treatment options. That's just one more sign of a president who is intent on building a culture of life, dignity and hope. (Applause.)

We've also been – we've also been vigorous in ensuring that taxpayer funding is not going to support abortion as a method of family planning. (Cheers, applause.) This year, HHS began implementing a rule that enforces statutory requirements under Title X by no longer permitting family planning services, funded with your taxpayer dollars, from occurring at the same location where abortion is provided. (Applause.)

Unbelievably, many abortion-providing Title X recipients chose to pull out of the program and stop delivering health care to women in need rather than complying with the law passed by Congress. You know, the new Title X regulation also protects women and children who have been victims of abuse, molestation, trafficking, and a number of other crimes, which complies with a requirement passed by Congress that the previous administration had ignored.

We rescinded an Obama administration guidance that prevented states from taking actions against providers that may be necessary to prevent Medicaid funds from going to fund abortion. (Applause.) We're also protecting your own healthcare dollars from going to services that would violate your conscience. Last year we issued guidance to allow people to claim a hardship exemption from the Affordable Care Act's individual mandate if all ACA plans offered in your area included abortion coverage, contrary to your beliefs. (Cheers, applause.)

One of the unshakeable commitments of HHS in our civil rights and nondiscrimination work is to ensure that every American is treated with dignity and is not discriminated against in our programs because he or she is a member of a statutorily protected class. All individuals should be treated with dignity and respect in healthcare. (Applause.) But all Americans who participate in or benefit from our programs also have a right to be free from discrimination not just based on protected classes, but the dictates of their conscience and the ways they live out their faith. (Applause.)

Neither form of discrimination will be tolerated under this administration. In fact, we've institutionalized that commitment. In 2018, under the leadership of Roger Severino here in the front row, we announced – (applause) – yeah, let's give him a hand. Roger. (Cheers, applause.) We announced the establishment of the Conscience and Religious Freedom Division in our Office for Civil Rights.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yay! (Laughter, cheers, applause.)

SEC. AZAR: And this will begin proper federal enforcement of existing laws that protect our first freedom. (Cheers, applause.)

This year we finalized a new comprehensive conscience regulation which protects the conscience and nondiscrimination rights of patients and healthcare providers by fully and robustly enforcing approximately 25 provisions passed by Congress. Now, all we're doing is providing ways to enforce the laws that are on the books, typically passed with strong bipartisan support by the people's representatives in Congress. But if you listen to critics of our regulation, you'd imagine we wrote some wholly new sets of laws or policies. Yet, literally all we're doing is providing robust enforcement for the laws that Congress has actually passed. (Applause.) Our

regulation provides the same kind of enforcement powers for these laws that we already accord to other civil rights protections.

We've done the enforcement work to back this up, too. Under Roger's leadership, we recently issued a notice of violation to a major hospital after finding that the hospital violated conscience laws by requiring a nurse to assist in an abortion. Forcing medical staff to assist in the taking of human life is wrong, plain and simple, and under President Trump we will not tolerate it. (Cheers, applause.)

We also took major actions against Hawaii and California to protect the conscience rights of pro-life pregnancy centers. When state laws coerced these centers into posting notices that referred women to abortion providers, we issued an unprecedented notice of violation under what are known as the Weldon and Coats-Snowe amendments. Partly as a result of that action, Hawaii signed a resolution agreement with the Trump administration not to enforce its own discriminatory state law. (Cheers, applause.)

And under the great leadership of Shannon Royce, also in the front row – (cheers, applause) – we've also protected the freedom of faith-based organizations that work for the vulnerable in human services by reducing barriers for faith-based providers who care for the elderly and disabled, and provide foster and adoption services. For instance, we issued South Carolina a waiver that ensured faith-based organizations can continue to serve children in need of foster care. We determined that these organizations would have otherwise faced unacceptable burdens to their religious beliefs. We certainly don't want to put up barriers to Americans living out their beliefs through providing important care to a vulnerable and needy population. (Cheers, applause.)

Now, many of you are quite familiar with one of the most prominent conscience fights in recent memory, the contraception mandate under the Affordable Care Act. The mandate required employer-sponsored insurance to cover some types of contraception that some religious groups and organizations found objectionable on religious or moral grounds. This included all kinds of organizations, but most poignantly many that care for the least among us like the Little Sisters of the Poor, a religious order that cares for elderly Americans of limited means.

As many of you know, the Little Sisters of the Poor and other groups fell under the scope of this regulation because the previous administration's so-called accommodation for religious organizations was so narrow. In fact, I've heard it joked that Jesus' own ministry might have had a hard time qualifying as a religious organization by something as strict as that originally promulgated definition. (Laughter.) You could almost imagine the scrutiny. Just 12 guys? They only fed the 5,000 once? (Laughter.) Is that an organized religious concern under the regulations? Hard to say. (Laughter.)

Well – (applause – well, the Trump administration recognized that the little sisters of the poor and so many other religious organizations and private citizens with religious or conscience objections had a right to live out their faiths through service. We stood beside the Little Sisters of the Poor and many other groups and provided them with the exemptions they deserved under

the law. (Applause.) If you want to live out your faith and serve your fellow Americans, we will not make you violate your conscience to do so. (Applause.)

Finally, I want to mention that we've gone beyond just protecting the rights of religious Americans to live out their faith by providing medical care and other important services. Through Shannon's Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives, or the Partnership Center, we've assisted communities of faith and faith-based providers of confronting many pressing health challenges. We've been especially proud to see faith communities work to expand access to treatment for Americans struggling with opioid addiction.

What I've laid out for you today are many of the ways that under President Trump HHS has protected life, conscience, and faith. There's a whole lot going on. But when I think about the very core of our mission and why I'm so proud to do the work we're doing, it's pretty simple. The department I get to run is really the Department of Life. I'm so proud to say that has never been more true than it is today. (Cheers, applause.)

HHS and its team have never fought more fiercely to protect life at all stages, from conception until natural death. That is thanks above all to the work, the leadership, and the courage of President Trump, the most pro-life president in American history. (Cheers, applause.)

I'm grateful for the chance to lead that work and to share it with you all today. You're here because you cherish life. You all innately know that every human being, as the Psalms put it, is fearfully and wonderfully made. This means that each person – whether unborn, young, old, or somewhere in between – has innate dignity. At HHS and under President Trump, we respect that truth, and we will continue to fight for it. That truth undergirds our mission and it informs our work every day at the department.

As you go about your work protecting life, strengthening your own communities, and caring for your families and your country, may God bless you. And may God continue to bless the United States of America. Thank you. (Cheers, applause.)

(END)