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*“And let us not trust to human effort alone, but humbly acknowledge the power and goodness of Almighty God who presides over the destiny of nations, and who has at all times been revealed in our nation’s history.”
Stephen Grover Cleveland, 1885*

AACS Offers Public Comments Supporting Religious Liberty

The AACS Legislative Office submitted public comments in support of the efforts by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to protect religious liberty and freedom of conscience. Earlier this year, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) in HHS published a request for public comments regarding a proposed rule which would ensure the enforcement of laws and subsequent regulations that protect religious liberty. This proposal is being issued by a new department within the HHS Office of Civil Rights—the Conscience and Religious Freedom Division, which was created for the sole purpose of monitoring and enforcing compliance with the religious freedom protections already contained in many laws. Titled “Protecting Statutory Conscience Rights in Health Care; Delegations of Authority,” the [proposed rule](#) outlines the department’s intent to “revise regulations previously promulgated to ensure that persons or entities are not subjected to certain practices or policies that violate conscience, coerce, or discriminate, in violation of such Federal laws.” The lengthy explanation of the proposed rule describes the various laws which include protections for religious liberty, including the Church Amendments, the Coats-Snowe Amendment, and the Weldon Amendment. The proposal also references the religious exemptions in the Affordable Care Act and in certain Medicaid and Medicare services which the OCR would enforce to ensure conscience protections for medical professionals. Additionally, the proposed rule would reverse a 2011 regulation issued under the Obama administration which rescinded all above-mentioned conscience protections. In their public comments, the AACS strongly supported the efforts “to enforce the Constitution’s guarantees of religious liberty,” noting that “safeguarding conscience and religious liberty is foundational to a free America.” AACS comments emphasized that “the rights that we so dearly cherish—such as the right to life, the right to live according to one’s own conscience and religious convictions, and the right to rear and educate our children according to deeply held religious beliefs—need protection now more than ever,” and the AACS praised “the OCR’s proposed treatment of higher education institutions and medical professions through the enforcement of laws and regulations that protect the rights of students and medical professionals to live, work, and study according to conscience or religious conviction.” The opportunity to offer comments is open to all members of the public, and the deadline to file a comment is Tuesday, March 27, 2018, at midnight EST. To leave a public comment regarding the proposed rule, please following the prompts on this [link](#).

Federal School Choice Bills Introduced

Not satisfied to rest on the significant progress made on school choice through the expansion of 529 accounts in the Tax Reform Act, Congress continues to work towards other opportunities to expand school choice at the federal level. Two new bills have been introduced this month which would provide opportunities for school choice. Rep. Jim Banks (IN) and Senators Ben Sasse (NE) and Tim Scott (SC) introduced the [Education Savings Accounts for Military Families Act](#), which would do as the title suggests: provide education savings accounts for military families, allowing them to use educational funds in a variety of ways to meet the educational needs of their children. Educational choice for military families is supported by the administration and many conservative groups that recognize this as a way not only to expand school choice at the federal level but also to provide a greater benefit for the families of those who serve our country. A second bill, the [USA Workforce Tax Credit Act](#), introduced by Representatives Lloyd Smucker (PA) and Alexander Mooney (WV), would establish a federal tax credit scholarship program. The program would operate much like similar state programs, allowing a federal tax credit to individuals and corporations that donate to a scholarship organization which helps low-income students attend a workforce development or apprenticeship training program.

Immediate Aid for Schools Affected by Natural Tragedies

As of Monday, state educational agencies (SEAs) may apply for funding through the [Immediate Aid to Restart School Operations \(Restart\)](#) program. Between the Restart program and the Emergency Impact Aid for Displaced Students program, Congress has appropriated \$2.5 billion in funding to help schools in states affected by Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Maria, and recent California wildfires. Once an SEA has received funding, it can help local educational agencies in getting public, private, and charter schools back to normal operations. With Department of Education (ED) funding, the SEAs are to focus on aiding in reopening schools, reenrolling students, and restarting operations in elementary and secondary schools in affected states. In addition to getting schools back on their feet, the ED will grant \$25 million in grants for local educational agencies to help children made homeless or displaced by disasters, \$100 million toward helping institutions of higher education affected by disasters, and \$75 million to institutions of higher education to help defray costs of enrolling displaced students. Regarding the total \$2.7 billion in funds, Secretary DeVos stated, “The long road to recovery continues, but these funds should provide vital support to schools and institutions to help them return to their full capabilities as quickly and effectively as possible.”

In Case You Missed It:

[Weekly Market Update](#) provided by Jeff Beach of the [AACS Investment Team at Merrill Lynch](#)

[10 Questions About School Safety](#)

[Supreme Court Should Spare Pro-Lifers from Compelled Pro-Abortion Speech](#)

[Mississippi Governor Bans Abortions After 15 Weeks](#) and within one day a [Judge Blocks the New Pro-Life Law](#)

[Iowa Senate Approves Ban on Abortions After Fetal Heartbeat Is Detected](#)

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