

February 16, 2022

The Honorable Danny Verdin  
Chair  
Medical Affairs Committee  
South Carolina Senate  
412 Gressette Building  
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

**Re: Oppose SB 811 – Do Not Allow the Use of Religion to Deny Health Care**

Dear Chair Verdin:

On behalf of the South Carolina members and supporters of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, I write to express our opposition to SB 811. Under the guise of religious liberty, this bill would allow medical practitioners, health care institutions, and health care payers to refuse to participate in or pay for nearly *any* health care service, thereby creating a serious threat to the health and well-being of patients.

Freedom of religion protects everyone’s right to practice the religion of their choice or no religion at all—so long as they don’t discriminate against or harm others. This bill should be rejected because it would result in harm to patients and, thus, violates the U.S. Constitution.

**The Exemption Harms Patients and Limits Access to Care**

The exemption created by SB 811 would put patient health at risk. Under the bill, a wide range of health care workers, facilities, hospitals, and insurers could refuse to participate in or pay for nearly any health care service. The result—patients would face serious harm. It would foster discrimination against patients—particularly women and LGBTQ patients—by putting the religious beliefs of health care practitioners, institutions, and insurers above their health. For example, SB 811 could allow:

- a nurse to refuse to treat the child of an unmarried couple;
- an insurer to refuse to cover PrEP or HIV treatment;
- a clinic employee to withhold information about emergency contraception from a victim of rape or incest seeking care;

- a doctor to withhold information about treatment options for a couple experiencing infertility; or
- a clinical psychologist to refuse to treat a patient who is considering divorce.

To make matters worse, this bill also does not include a requirement that patients be counseled or referred to get the health care service they have been denied. This would make it more difficult for South Carolinians, particularly those in rural areas or with limited options for providers who take their insurance, to access critical care.

SB 811 would also create an unworkable system for health care facilities, which could result in a staff member unilaterally vetoing key aspects of patient care. For example, an employee who handles billing at a rural health care clinic could object to billing for contraception. If the clinic cannot afford to hire another employee, it might be unable to provide *any* contraceptive-related care. This legislation would force hospitals and other institutions to reorganize staffing structures, consume precious resources with unnecessary workarounds, duplicate staffing in cost-prohibitive ways, unfairly burden nonobjecting employees, reduce services, and even close programs in an attempt to reduce the risk that a single employee will deny care or information to a patient.

This bill would also give all practitioners, institutions, and payers immunity from civil, criminal, and administrative liability for refusing to provide a service because of religious beliefs. In short, no matter the harm that a patient might endure because of a denial, providers and insurers would not face consequences, and patients who have suffered harm would find themselves without a remedy.

### **SB 811 Violates the U.S. Constitution**

Under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the government's ability to issue religious exemptions is not unlimited: "At some point, accommodation may devolve into an unlawful fostering of religion."<sup>1</sup> To avoid a constitutional violation, a religious exemption "must be measured so that it does not override other significant interests"<sup>2</sup> and may not "impose unjustified burdens on other[s]."<sup>3</sup> In other words, when deciding whether to grant religious exemptions, the government is forbidden from granting a religious exemption that will harm others.

SB 811 fails this test because it places the religious views of medical practitioners and health care institutions (defined so broadly as to include any employee at a hospital,

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<sup>1</sup> *Corp. of the Presiding Bishop v. Amos*, 483 U.S. 327, 334-35 (1987) (*internal quotation marks omitted*).

<sup>2</sup> *Cutter v. Wilkinson*, 544 U.S. 709, 722 (2005); *see also Estate of Thornton v. Caldor, Inc.* 472 U.S. 703, 709-10 (1985) ("unyielding weighting" of religious interests of those taking exemption "over all other interests" violates Constitution).

<sup>3</sup> *Cutter*, 544 U.S. at 726. *See also Texas Monthly, Inc. v. Bullock*, 480 U.S. 1, 18 n.8 (1989) (religious accommodations may not impose "substantial burdens on nonbeneficiaries").

clinic, or medical school, among others, or the institutions themselves) and insurers above the medical needs of patients, putting their health at risk. Under SB 811, health care providers could refuse to provide treatment regardless of the availability of other professionals. Indeed, a patient in need of critical care could find that they are unable to find a doctor or hospital to provide vital services.

Exemptions that create a significant, harmful, discriminatory impact on others, like the one created by this bill, are impermissible and must be barred.

**Conclusion**

South Carolina should not allow religion to be used to block patients' access to health care. This bill would cause harm, which threatens the religious freedom that protects us all. For all of these reasons, Americans United urges you to oppose SB 811. Thank you for your consideration on this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Nikolas Nartowicz".

Nikolas Nartowicz  
State Policy Counsel

cc: Members of the Senate Medical Affairs Committee