

**WAMU Commentary – November 16, 2009**  
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The District of Columbia Council is considering a bill to legalize same sex marriage. Marriage is the foundation around which we have built our society, and it has profound public implications.

The issue for Catholic Charities is the inclusion of an appropriate religious exemption that will allow us to continue to provide our services without compromising our beliefs if the bill passes. Without an exemption that allows us to remain faithful to our tenets, Catholic Charities may cease to be permitted by the City to provide the contracted and licensed services that it has provided for generations.

Catholic Charities will continue to serve the poor even if this law passes. We always have served those in need without questions asked, and always will, unless the Council prohibits us from doing so.

Catholic Charities has been serving the poor and most vulnerable in Washington for over 80 years. We have had a tremendous impact on this city. Last year, we served more than 68,000 people in the District with basic needs – housing, health care, mental health services, foster care and numerous services to people living with developmental disabilities. That is not merely a number – it represents 68,000 individuals who faced a crisis and uncertainty, and found assistance in solving their problem and moving forward.

We serve people of all walks of life – looking beyond race, gender, creed, nationality and sexual orientation to see the person in need.

Our success, and therein the success of families trying to overcome poverty, lies in approaching social services as a faith-driven ministry to transform lives.

The District has chosen to grant Catholic Charities service contracts for years because Catholic Charities is so effective. We have been one of the most stable, reliable and capable partners the District has had for decades in caring for the City's neediest residents. We are fiscally responsible, highly qualified to do this work and deeply invested in the well-being of our neighbors.

When the District government wanted to shift its housing from shelters to permanent supportive housing, they turned to Catholic Charities. Now that program, Fortitude Housing, has successfully helped more than 100 former chronically homeless adults learning to live independently and off the streets.

When the District wanted to try a new approach to treating children with behavioral and psychiatric crises, they turned to us to design and operate that program. The CHAMPS program provides in home, emergency clinical work for children.

When the District was seeking a partner to build housing for low-income families and individuals, Catholic Charities and the Archdiocese provided the land on which the housing could be built.

In closing, let me say this: we are simply asking the District to allow us to fulfill our call to serve while staying true to our beliefs. We cherish our ability to serve the neediest and most vulnerable in this city.

We fear Catholic Charities will be prohibited by the City from providing the contracted and licensed services that the City has relied on for generations.

As a Catholic organization this is our ministry and our calling. We are fully committed in faith and action to improving the lives of the most vulnerable.

It is possible for the Council to find a balance in this same sex marriage law, as other states have done. We believe the Council can amend this bill in a way that protects all interests involved: the poor, same sex couples, and religious believers.