

EQUITY

FORWARD

Trump's HHS Office for Civil Rights: *Ideological Agenda, Nationwide Impact*

Background

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office for Civil Rights (OCR) exists “to ensure that people have equal access to and the opportunity to participate in and receive services from HHS programs without facing unlawful discrimination.” However, under the Trump administration, OCR has pursued policies and taken actions to further a radical, ideological agenda at the expense of its underlying mission. OCR and its leadership are working to allow discrimination against underserved communities across the country by prioritizing religious exemptions, denials of service and other means of restricting equitable access to health care over ensuring equal access to care.

In the development and operation of the office's new, unprecedented Conscience and Religious Freedom (CRF) division, there are questions about how the office's new staff was hired and paid for, and the mission they are executing.

OCR Leadership Entrenched in Anti-LGBTQ and Anti-Abortion Movements

[Roger Severino](#), Director of OCR, has demonstrated his ideology for years prior to his OCR appointment. Severino [argued](#) that, “maleness and femaleness are biological realities to be respected and affirmed, not altered or treated as diseases.” He has vigorously [argued](#), “against legalizing same-sex marriage and mandated accommodations for transgender individuals in school locker rooms or public bathrooms.” While at the Heritage Foundation, he [wrote](#) that Congress should bar Planned Parenthood affiliates, and other health centers that provide a broad range of reproductive care, from receiving Medicaid reimbursements or Title X grants if they continue to perform abortions.

Additionally, [March Bell](#), the chief of staff at OCR, previously ran the congressional committee investigating the “fetal tissue procurement industry” and recommended the complete defunding of Planned Parenthood.

Undue Influence from Organizations Fighting to Restrict Rights

Severino was previously employed at The [Heritage Foundation](#), a conservative Washington think tank that consistently takes extremist, anti-abortion positions. In December 2017, The Heritage Foundation released a report urging the administration to protect health workers with moral or religious objections from performing certain procedures, like abortion or gender confirmation surgery. One month later, OCR announced the creation of a new division to shield these same health workers.

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Suspicious Financial and Controversial Contracting Practices

According to emails obtained by Equity Forward, it appears that contractors working at OCR were deeply involved in the planning and rollout of the division's "conscience protection regulation."

Further emails obtained from OCR staff raise questions on how the department was paying for new CRF division, which added at least a dozen new employees and contractors within its first year of operation.

Indications of Anti-Science and Discriminatory Policy Priorities to Come

Blatant ideological motivation continues to impact the agenda at OCR. When speaking at the 2018 National Right to Life Convention, breaking decades of precedent by HHS officials, Severino [stated](#), "Our President is fearless when it comes to life and conscience ... We're just getting started." The most recent example of pursuing the Trump administration's extreme agenda can be seen throughout Severino's interview with [Roll Call](#). He indicated that OCR is also looking at other forms of religious discrimination, including the right to object to state vaccination requirements in certain government programs—all while government agencies are working to contain a [multi-state measles outbreak](#). He also highlighted his goals to investigate states that require insurance to cover abortion and defend students training to be medical providers if they object to participating in abortions.

This alignment from both inside OCR and outside groups to which they have ties clearly prioritizes the administration's extreme agenda over any fact-based, scientific or best practices approach to policy creation.