



Focus on Religious Freedom

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Why was St. Francis Health System in Oklahoma Threatened with Expulsion from Medicare, Medicaid and CHIP Over Its Long-Approved Sanctuary Candle?

The government has seen the light and has abandoned its attempt to force an Oklahoma hospital to blow out a small candle or stop serving elderly, disabled, and low-income patients,” Lori Windham, vice president and senior counsel at the Becket religious liberty legal group, said May 5 on Twitter.

The chapel’s candle has never been an issue in previous inspections. Other open flames are permitted at hospitals in kitchen stoves and ovens, gas dryers in the laundry room, flames in gas water heaters, and welding for construction purposes, Windham noted.

According to Windham, the hospital candle is “encased in a thick glass globe, which is itself encased in a second glass globe, covered by a bronze top that fits over the second globe.” This globe rests in a bronze holder affixed to the chapel wall. There are fire extinguishing sprinkler heads around the candle and the local fire marshal has long approved it.

During a Feb. 21 inspection, Windham’s letter to CMS recounted, a surveyor from The Joint Commission at Saint Francis Hospital South in Tulsa “expressly asked to go to the chapel to see if there was a living flame.” The surveyor observed to hospital personnel that “other Catholic hospitals had complied and extinguished the living flame at their chapels, substituting it with an electric light.” While federal standards do classify chapel candles as “flame-producing equipment,” these are only barred within one foot of a nasal cannula, a device to provide supplemental oxygen. The hospital candle is never near such a device. The relevant codes and standards of the National Fire Protection Association expressly permit sanctuary candles.

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