

Pro-life groups say changes to controversial Canada Summer Jobs program won't fix problem

Canada's Liberal government will change the controversial pro-abortion attestation on its Canada Summer Jobs applications for 2019, but some pro-life advocates are not impressed.

The new program will still prevent grant money going to jobs that seek to "undermine or restrict" access to abortion.

"The final language has yet to be released," said Phil Horgan, president of the Catholic Civil Rights League. "The minister's current actions recognize that the government understood that it had a problem. But it appears that the federal government has moved from an attestation requirement of beliefs, or forced speech by having to check a box, to denying certain 'proposed activities' in respect of those legitimate beliefs."



Phil Horgan

"It is a continued suppression of viewpoints not shared by the government, for which funding will continue to be denied," said Horgan, who is a constitutional lawyer.

"It is effectively establishing a 'bubble zone' to prevent funding to organizations who do not share the federal government's unfettered pro-abortion position."

"I think it's a step in the right direction, but it's obviously not too far," said Marie-Claire Bissonnette, youth coordinator for Campaign Life Coalition, an organization that would still be denied summer jobs grants funding under the new policy. "It's remaining a method in which the government imposes its ideological agenda on Canadians."

"There's a possibility they will continue imposing their ideological agenda by taking away government aid to organizations they don't agree with," Bissonnette said. "The recent incident with Canada Summer Jobs should be seen as a warning."

However, Right Now co-founder Alissa Golob thinks the government has made the problem worse.

"Now the government is going one step further by saying that if you're personally pro-life as an organization or institution, that's fine, as long as you shut up about it," she said. "But if you act on those beliefs, you're not even eligible to apply. They're purchasing silence from those they don't agree with."

"There's a fine line between forced speech and prohibiting free speech, and Justin Trudeau likes to skip rope over it," Golob said.

"It's concerning because we do as Canadians have the right to speak out against things we disagree with," said Bissonnette. "The government is falsely proposing abortion is a right, and it's not."

Employment Minister Patty Hajdu announced the changes to the program in interviews to selected media published Dec. 6.

"Unfortunately, we heard that there was confusion about the wording of the attestation last year, and it was heightened by the Harper Conservative misinformation machine, which sort of seized it and amplified the confusion," said Hajdu in an interview with John Geddes of *Maclean's* magazine Dec. 6. "We tried last year to be very clear that this wasn't about values and beliefs, it was about jobs and job activities."

"Funding under the Canada Summer Jobs program must not be used to undermine or restrict the exercise of rights legally protected in Canada," said Hajdu's press secretary Veronique Simard in an e-mail to CCN. "We heard that the language in the attestation sometimes led to organizations who would be eligible not applying."

"We've changed the attestation and clarified eligibility criteria and will be encouraging employers to use the online application system to simplify the application process," Simard said.

“We want to be very clear that this isn’t about beliefs, but rather about ensuring the projects and activities don’t undermine or restrict the legal rights of Canadians.”

Service Canada has not yet informed Members of Parliament of the changes and the official launch of the Canada Summer Job program for 2019 is Dec. 17. Consequently, some faith-based groups are reluctant to comment until they see the official wording, even though on background some were shown the changes during a consultation process this fall and are “cautiously optimistic.”

Last year, the Canada Summer Jobs application required applicants to check a box saying their organization’s core mandate supported the charter and other rights, including sexual and reproductive rights, which were explained on the Service Canada website to include access to abortion.

This was widely viewed as a values test by many faith-based organizations, including the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB), the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC), the Catholic Civil Rights League, and the Canadian Council of Christian Charities (CCCC).



Barry Bussey

Several of these groups were examining legal options, among them Barry Bussey, legal affairs director of the CCCC.

“What does it mean to undermine or restrict a woman’s access?” asked Bussey. “That is the key phrase here. Does expressing one’s view going to be enough to mean restricting and undermining?”

Bussey, who hadn’t seen the government’s new policy, said he expects with the new policy some of the charities he represents will decide they can apply for

funding.

Charities and parishes that run soup kitchens or summer camps might believe they can apply without having to violate their consciences, Bussey said, but asked, "What if a discussion of abortion comes up around the campfire?"

Bussey said he has no idea what will happen to the seven lawsuits against the federal government over the attestation.

Seven lawsuits, the first by Toronto and Area Right to Life, five by small business owners across the country; and one by Power to Change, an evangelical Christian organization formerly known as Campus Crusade for Christ, have been working their way through federal court. There is also a lawsuit on behalf of a small business in Alberta handled by the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms that was before the Alberta Court of Queen's Bench.

"I would love to see a court deciding that the government should not be forcing people to violate their conscience to make an application for a government program," Bussey said. "That would be a beautiful thing for freedom of conscience and religion in this country, especially in the federal court, which is the court dealing with the federal government."