



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on January 14, 2011

Vanderbilt University Changes Policy Requiring Nursing Students to Assist in Abortions

On Wednesday, January 12, Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee changed its policy for nurse residency applications, one day after the Alliance Defense Fund (ADF) filed a complaint with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on behalf of a nursing student opposed to VU requirements that nursing residents participate in abortions.



The ADF is a legal alliance especially dedicated to defending religious freedom, the sanctity of life, marriage and family. Its website states its [mission](#) as "defending the right to hear and speak the Truth through strategy, training, funding, and litigation."

When the ADF took the case of the unnamed nursing student, they learned that the university receives annually more than \$300 million in federal grants, and is therefore prohibited by federal law from forcing students to participate in abortions if doing so is against their religious or moral convictions.

The university's previous nurse residency [application](#) stated:

If you are chosen for the Nurse Residency Program in the Women's Health track, you will be expected to care for women undergoing termination of pregnancy. Procedures performed in the Labor and Delivery unit include...terminations of pregnancy....

The application also required students to sign a letter that read in part,

If you feel you cannot provide care to women during this type of event, we encourage you to apply to a different track of the Nurse Residency Program to explore opportunities that may best fit your skills and career goals....

ADF Legal Counsel Matt Bowman commented on Tuesday,

Christians and other pro-life members of the medical community shouldn't be forced to participate in abortions to pursue their profession. People enter the medical profession to protect and heal the helpless. Federal law protects them from being required to kill the helpless. The law clearly states that grant recipients cannot accept taxpayer dollars and require health care workers to participate in abortions, which is precisely what Vanderbilt is doing.

David French, ADF Senior Counsel, observed,

We repeatedly see universities and other users of taxpayer dollars tell students and staff that they must submit to the institution's preferred ideology or take a hike. What many of these institutions truly want — besides money — are people who share their leftist political and social view. The issue here is their application materials. You can't create a better way to screen out pro-life



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applicants if you try. That violates the [federal law] regardless of whatever policy they might have.

The ADF had requested immediate action from HHS to prohibit VU from discriminating against applicants who don't wish to promise they'll assist in abortions. The urgency of the ADF's request for change was in order that prospective nursing students could meet the university deadline for residency application on January 28 — which they will now be able to do.

Now that Vanderbilt has changed its policy, the newly-revised application states that such procedures are part of the program, but informs applicants that accommodations can be made for those who do not wish to assist with abortions:

If you wish not to participate in the termination of a pregnancy procedure on account of your religious beliefs or moral convictions, you should direct your request for an accommodation to [the assigned personnel].

The Alliance Defense Fund praised the changes, but noted the university's attempt to avoid an admission of wrongdoing. After the complaint had been filed, university officials asserted the next day that Vanderbilt never discriminated against those with moral objections to abortion. According to [The Blaze](#) for January 11,

Vanderbilt University Medical Center spokesman John Howser said the application's acknowledgment was created to inform applicants that they will be asked to provide care to women who have had, or are seeking, abortions. It does not mean that residents with religious or moral objections will be required to participate in the actual procedures. Howser added, "The letter was added in order to create an awareness that terminations [of pregnancies] are performed here at Vanderbilt. If you choose to participate [in the nurse residency program], you will be around patients who have had or are seeking terminations, and you may be asked to care for them. It does not say that you are required to participate in performing or in the performance of terminations." And he said VU has its own specific policy exempting employees from participating in certain activities against their beliefs.

After the university's policy-change, ADF Legal Counsel Matt Bowman noted: "It's ironic that Vanderbilt changed its policy one day after denying that it required the pledge."

Vanderbilt has also eliminated the requirement mandating applicants to sign the women's health letter.

The Alliance Defense Fund is currently litigating several cases involving Christians required to act against their convictions.

As noted in [The New American](#) on the same day the ADF filed its complaint, abortion rates have stopped falling, but many members of the new Congress are promising to back pro-life legislation. If they keep their promises, opportunities for conflict such as the complaint against Vanderbilt are likely to increase, giving pro-life adherents more platforms to push back against abortion

Photo: Kirkland Hall is home to Vanderbilt's administration.



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