Overhaul of the “OCR Mission & Vision” on HHS's Office of Civil Rights “OCR Leadership” Webpage

Website Monitoring Mini-report

Aaron Lemelin - aaron@sunlightfoundation.com
Rachel Bergman - rbergman@sunlightfoundation.com

The purpose of “mini-reports” is to inform journalists, experts, and the public about a reported or developing news story. A “mini-report” is a condensed version of one of the Web Integrity Project’s website monitoring reports, created on a rapid timeline to explain a narrowly scoped alteration, and is not a comprehensive analysis of a website.

Summary of findings and context: Between April 24, 2019 and April 30, 2019, HHS altered the “OCR Leadership” page (Webpage 1) on its Office for Civil Rights (OCR) website to overhaul the “OCR Mission & Vision” section. The section previously did not include any references to “conscience and religious freedom” or “religious discrimination.” It now includes text that states the office “educates the public concerning our nation’s civil rights, conscience and religious freedom” and ensures that HHS-conducted or funded programs “comply with federal laws that guarantee the protection of conscience and free exercise of religion and prohibit coercion and religious discrimination.” Around the same time as the change, on April 24, Politico reported that by May 4 HHS was expected to release a new rule granting protections for healthcare workers who refuse to provide services, such as abortion or transition-related care for transgender individuals, based on religious or moral objections. Separately, on April 25, the Center for American Progress argued that the latest HHS budget request for fiscal year 2020, which states that OCR is the “primary defender” of “conscience and religious freedom protections,” emphasizes protecting religious freedom over LGBTQ rights.

Webpage 1:

Page title: OCR Leadership

Webpage status: Altered (this change occurred between April 24, 2019, 3:55 PM ET and April 30, 2019 4:25 PM ET according to our monitoring software. IAWM captures, which correspond to a wider date range, are linked below):

- Before: March 5, 2019
- After: April 30, 2019

URL: https://www.hhs.gov/ocr/about-us/leadership/index.html

Note: The page indicates that the content was “last reviewed on April 26, 2019.”

Description of change:

1. The “OCR Mission & Vision” statement on the “OCR Leadership” page was altered between April 24, 2019 and April 30, 2019 (Screenshot 1):
   a. Under “Mission” statement:
      i. Removed text:
         “The mission of the Office for Civil Rights is to improve the health and well-being of people across the nation, to ensure that people have equal
access to and the opportunity to participate in and receive services from
HHS programs without facing unlawful discrimination, and to protect the
privacy and security of health information in accordance with applicable
law.”
ii. Added text:
“As an HHS law enforcement agency, OCR investigates complaints,
conducts compliance reviews, vindicates rights, develops policy,
promulgates regulations, provides technical assistance, and educates the
public concerning our nation’s civil rights, conscience and religious
freedom, and health information privacy and security laws. OCR
accomplishes this by:

- Ensuring that recipients of HHS federal financial assistance
  comply with federal civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination on
  the basis of race, color, national origin, disability, age, sex and
  religion.
- Ensuring that HHS, state and local governments, health care
  providers, health plans, and others comply with federal laws that
  guarantee [sic] the protection of conscience and free exercise of
  religion and prohibit coercion and religious discrimination in
  HHS-conducted or funded programs.
- Ensuring the practices of health care providers, health plans,
  healthcare clearinghouses, and their business [sic] associates
  adhere to federal privacy, security, and breach notification
  regulations under the Health Insurance Portability and
  Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Health Information Technology
  for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Act, through the
  investigation of complaints, self-reported breaches, compliance
  reviews, and audits.”

b. Under “Vision” statement:
   i. Removed text:
      “Through investigations, voluntary dispute resolution, enforcement,
technical assistance, policy development and information services, OCR
will protect the civil rights of all individuals who are subject to
discrimination in health and human services programs and protect the
health information privacy rights of consumers.”
   ii. Added text:
      “OCR enforces civil rights laws and conscience and religious freedom
laws, and protects the privacy, security, and availability of individuals’
health information. Through these mechanisms, OCR helps to ensure
equal access to health and human services, protects the exercise of
religious beliefs and moral convictions by individuals and institutions
participating in HHS programs, advances the health and well-being of all
Americans, protect individuals’ health information, and provides the tools
for provider awareness and full engagement of individuals in decisions related to their health care.”

Screenshot 1: A side-by-side comparison of a portion of the March 6, 2019 and April 30, 2019 versions of the page, as captured by the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine.