



## **ACLU Announces Settlement in Challenge to Government-Funded Religion in the Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Program the “Silver Ring Thing”**

### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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BOSTON -- The American Civil Liberties Union today announced a settlement with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in a case challenging federal funding of religious activities in a nationwide abstinence-only-until-marriage program, the Silver Ring Thing.

“We are pleased that the government has agreed to stop using taxpayer dollars to fund the Silver Ring Thing’s religious activities,” said Julie Sternberg, a Senior Staff Attorney with the ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project. “The ACLU supports the right of Silver Ring Thing to offer religious programming, but it may not do so using government funds.”

In today’s settlement, HHS agreed that it will not fund the Silver Ring Thing’s abstinence-only-until-marriage education program as it is currently structured, and that any future funding is contingent on the Silver Ring Thing’s compliance with federal law prohibiting the use of federal funds to support religious activities. In addition, HHS agreed to closely monitor any future grants to the program. Today’s agreement remains in effect until September 30, 2008.

The ACLU filed a lawsuit in May 2005 asking HHS to stop using public dollars to support the Silver Ring Thing’s religious programming. As a result of the lawsuit, HHS suspended funding to the program in August 2005, citing concerns that the program “may not have included adequate safeguards to clearly separate in time or location inherently religious activities from federally-funded activities.”

“Massachusetts does not need or want federally funded programs that promote a particular religion and contain misleading information when it comes to preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases,” said Carol Rose, Executive Director of the

ACLU of Massachusetts. “Our students need federally funded programs that discuss the benefits of abstinence and teach them about effective use of contraception.”

Since 1997, the federal government has spent nearly a billion dollars on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. President Bush proposed increasing federal spending on abstinence-only-until-marriage program by \$27 million for fiscal year 2007. Yet research indicates that in addition to using federal funds to support religious activities, many such programs do not help teens delay having sex, and some studies show that these programs actually deter teens from protecting themselves from unintended pregnancy or disease when they start having sex.

“Today’s settlement should serve as a wake-up call for HHS to better monitor the abstinence-only-until-marriage organizations they fund,” said Daniel Mach, an attorney with the ACLU’s Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief and a member of the legal team on today’s case. “Government dollars cannot be used to promote a particular religion. We will continue to fight any violations we may find.”

Over the past three years, the federal government has awarded more than one million dollars to the Silver Ring Thing. According to legal papers filed by the ACLU, the Silver Ring Thing describes its mission as “offering a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the best way to live a sexually pure life.” During the Silver Ring Thing’s flagship three-hour program, members testify about how accepting Jesus Christ improved their lives, quote Bible passages, and urge audience members to ask the Lord Jesus Christ to come into their lives. In addition, the official silver ring of the program is inscribed with a reference to the biblical verse “1 Thess. 4:3-4,” which reads “God wants you to be holy, so you should keep clear of all sexual sin. Then each of you will control your body and live in holiness and honor.”

Today’s case, *ACLU of Massachusetts v. Leavitt*, was filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Lawyers on the case include Sternberg and Charu Chandrasekhar of the ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project; Mach of the ACLU’s Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief; Jared Freedman, Craig Cowie, Victoria Jueds, Jessica Tillipman, and Avlana Eisenberg of Jenner & Block LLP; and Sarah Wunsch of the ACLU of Massachusetts.

To view today’s settlement agreement

<http://www.aclu.org/reproductiverights/sexed/242391g120060223.html>

For more information on the ACLU’s work regarding abstinence-only-until-marriage education visit [www.takeissuetakecharge.org](http://www.takeissuetakecharge.org) <<http://www.takeissuetakecharge.org>>