



ACLU Challenges Misuse of Taxpayer Dollars to Fund Religion in Nationwide Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Program

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BOSTON - The American Civil Liberties Union and Jenner & Block LLP today filed a lawsuit challenging the federal government's misuse of taxpayer dollars to fund religious activities in the "Silver Ring Thing," a nationwide ministry program that uses abstinence-only sex education as a means to bring "unchurched" students to Jesus Christ.

"Using public funds, the 'Silver Ring Thing' urges students to commit themselves to Christ," said Julie Sternberg, Senior Staff Attorney at the ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project. "The courts have repeatedly said that taxpayer dollars cannot be used to promote religion. The 'Silver Ring Thing' blatantly violates this principle."

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 today, 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."

The "Silver Ring Thing" has held events in Alabama, Connecticut, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, West Virginia, and Wisconsin and is scheduled to visit Georgia, Ohio, and North Carolina, among other states, in the coming year. Since April 2003, it has held three events in the Boston area and is scheduled to hold a fourth in October of this year.

"The federal government should not underwrite the religious indoctrination of Massachusetts students," said Carol Rose, Executive Director of the ACLU of Massachusetts. "The 'Silver Ring Thing' is nothing more than a vehicle for converting

young people to Christianity. Our taxpayer dollars should play no part in such a program.”

Since 1997, the federal government has spent more than \$700 million taxpayer dollars on abstinence-only-until-marriage programs. This year an additional \$39 million was proposed for fiscal year 2006, which would bring the total federal dollars spent on these programs per year to \$206 million.

There is no conclusive evidence that abstinence-only-until-marriage education reduces the rate of unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. Moreover, research indicates that in addition to proselytizing, many of these programs do not help teens delay having sex, and some studies show evidence that these programs actually deter teens from protecting themselves from unintended pregnancy or disease when they become sexually active.

“It is alarming that the federal government pours so much money into ineffective and dangerous abstinence-only-until-marriage programs that promote religion,” said Daniel Mach, a partner at Jenner & Block LLP. “This misuse of public funds not only harms young people but impermissibly constitutes government-funded religion.”

In a related case, earlier this year, the ACLU asked a U.S. District Court in Louisiana to hold the Governor’s Program on Abstinence in contempt of a 2002 order requiring it to keep religion out of the taxpayer funded sex education program. A decision is pending in that case.

Today’s case is ACLU of Massachusetts v. Leavitt and was filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts. Lawyers on the case include Sternberg and Caroline Mala Corbin of the ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project, Mach, Victoria Jueds, Thomas Pulham, and Jessica Tillipman of Jenner & Block LLP, and Sarah Wunsch of the ACLU of Massachusetts.

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