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Faith Based Discrimination Unacceptable

Since George W. Bush became president, HRC has been a vigilant watchdog to see how the new administration will handle issues of concern to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. The current battle over President Bush's faith-based initiative - including the Salvation Army - is a critical test and sadly appears to reveal the administration's true colors.

We were stunned when we learned the administration and the Salvation Army were using our lives - and the lives of our families - as bargaining chips in a secret backroom deal. And we are gravely disappointed that President Bush and Vice President Cheney sanctioned discrimination against GLBT Americans.

In a vote orchestrated by the GOP leadership in the House of Representatives, they pitted important faith-based services against important civil liberties. Their actions were unnecessary, divisive and created conflict where there could have easily been consensus. On this issue, we sought statesmanship and got brinkmanship. In short, we got "confrontational conservatism."

The White House-backed Community Solutions Act H.R. 7 offered by Reps. J.C. Watts, R-Okla., and Tony Hall, D-Ohio passed July 19 in the House. The bill would override state and local civil rights laws by allowing religious organizations to discriminate in employment decisions and in the provision of services.

The measure would effectively allow our tax dollars to be used to discriminate against us in places where state and local

laws prohibit discrimination against GLBT Americans. If it becomes law, this bill would create a situation where many GLBT Americans would be publicly subsidizing their own discrimination.

The Human Rights Campaign recognizes and supports the critical work performed by the many faith-based organizations in our nation. We support the principle of religious liberty. But the bottom line is our country should not funnel tax money - that all of us pay - to groups that actively discriminate.

Religious freedom and freedom from discrimination must harmoniously coexist and thrive together in a democratic society. And when this legislation reflects these principles, it will find our support and the support of the majority of Americans.

In letters, phone calls, appeals to the grassroots and countless hours of lobbying, HRC, coalition partners and fair-minded members of Congress gave the administration and the House Republican leadership every opportunity to fix this bill. On Tuesday, Rep. Mark Foley, a moderate Florida Republican, and Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., both prepared amendments to H.R. 7 to fix the bill. Both were rejected by the leadership.

When the bill reached the House floor July 18, it became crystal clear that we had succeeded in lining up enough votes to send it back to the Judiciary Committee with instructions to remove the offending language. It was then that the administration and the House Republican leadership temporarily pulled the bill in order to engage

in a ferocious - and ultimately successful - effort to twist the arms of some two dozen moderate Republicans to oppose any effort to change the bill.

The hypocrisy of the administration and the House leadership on this issue is astounding. We are struck by the incongruous position of "states rights" conservatives who have long trumpeted local control, only to run roughshod over state and local civil rights laws in order to ram through this discriminatory initiative.

Their mantra of state and local control on issues ranging from education to the environment is thrown out the window when it comes to GLBT Americans. Moreover, it is clear the administration is attempting to accomplish through legislation what they were unable to accomplish through a regulatory deal with the Salvation Army.

We believe the action on July 19 was a hollow victory for the administration and the House GOP leadership. This battle now moves to the Senate. By ignoring pleas to fix the bill's shortcomings, the administration has made passage in the Senate demonstrably more difficult for itself. But we need each and every one of you to keep this challenge alive.

Because what happens in Washington does matter, we are calling on every GLBT American and those who care about us to

challenge the White House to support a Senate version of this bill that does not discriminate against GLBT Americans. Call President Bush at 202-456-1414 and tell him: "It is wrong to use federal funding - including my tax dollars - to support programs that exempt religious organizations from civil rights laws."

And consider this: Thousands upon thousands of Americans, including GLBT Americans, received their notice of a tax refund on July 19. Think about reinvesting that refund in the battle for GLBT equality. As for the team at HRC, we will continue to do the hard daily work and not let up for a moment until this legislation is cured of what ails it. Strong grassroots pressure from around the nation, combined with strategic advocacy here in Washington D.C., is the formula for success. And none of it happens without you.

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