



National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

Leaving Our Children Behind: Welfare Reform and the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Community

Introduction

In 1996, Congress passed and President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), replacing the then-existing welfare program with a new system called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The law expires this year, meaning that Congress must reauthorize TANF by September 30, 2002 in order for US welfare programs to continue to operate.

Welfare reform, as it has been articulated by the Bush Administration and is being debated in certain sectors, is fundamentally biased toward promoting and privileging particular types of families, while penalizing and stigmatizing others. It promotes a certain type of heterosexuality—that is, heterosexuality practiced within the context of marriage. As a result, welfare reform poses a fundamental threat to the rights of all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people, and by extension GLBT families. It poses particular threats to GLBT youth, GLBT elders, lesbian and gay parents, and the children of same-sex partners.

Marriage Promotion

Backed by influential members of the Bush Administration, the ‘Marriage Movement’ seeks to restrict access to certain tax-funded benefits to married heterosexual couples, and to make it harder for people to get divorced. Supporters of the ‘Marriage Movement’ view the decline in married-couple families in the U.S., and the rise in single-parent led families and cohabitating adults, as *the* root of poverty in this country. Consequently, they propose that married, two-parent families should receive priority for some social services and benefits—such as enrollment slots in the Head Start preschool program, public housing units, job training programs, and financial aid for education. Making marriage a prerequisite to accessing rights, benefits and services assumes heterosexuality, and takes place in a political environment in which marriage rights for same-sex couples and the right to serve as adoptive or foster parents are under attack across the U.S., as well as on the floor of Congress.

Fatherhood Initiatives

George W. Bush and others in his administration have made fatherhood a national priority, and millions of dollars in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) budget have been dedicated to funding ‘fatherhood initiatives,’ which would potentially discriminate against GLBT people. Proposed policies call for prohibiting the use of fertility clinics as an option for prospective lesbian mothers and other unmarried women. They have also called on the government to outlaw divorce unless both spouses grant their consent. This could potentially trap millions of people in unhappy marriages, including many GLBT people who do not accept their sexuality until after they entered heterosexual marriages.

Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Education

Fifty million dollars annually in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds are earmarked for supporting abstinence-only education, ostensibly aimed at preventing teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock births. Acceptance of these funds, which are matched nearly one-to-one with

state dollars, is contingent upon education programs' satisfaction of eight strict requirements. Five of these eight requirements are educational content constraints that either ignore or stigmatize the existence of homosexuality and GLBT people. Thus programs that focus on abstinence-only-until-marriage are detrimental to GLBT youth, those youth questioning their sexual orientation, the children of GLBT parents, and GLBT teachers and administrators in the nation's schools.

Faith-Based Initiatives

Faith-based initiatives involve the transfer of tax dollars to religious institutions to pay for the delivery of social services. Under the Administration's current proposals, the provision of this funding carries no requirement that the recipients-religious institutions-not discriminate. Nor does it carry any safeguard against recipients of social services being subjected to proselytizing and other forms of coercive activity by these institutions. Thus a religious organization could discriminate in hiring staff on the basis of marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other characteristic that the group claims is objectionable to its religious tenets. These religious organizations could also ban openly GLBT people from receiving services and justify this as essential to maintaining the "religious character" of a program.

Conclusion

The primary sources of the threat in welfare reform come from members of the Bush Administration. A few of these individuals are Wade Horn, the Assistant Secretary to the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS); Andrew Bush, Director of the Office of Family Assistance, HHS; and Don Eberly, Deputy Director, National Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. These individuals and others like them are founders of movements such as the National Fatherhood Initiative or the Marriage Movement, or are socially conservative members of regressive think tanks. These members of the Bush Administration hold great power, in that they hold various positions that are extremely influential in shaping welfare reform policy today.

The report *Leaving Our Children Behind* describes how welfare policy changed in 1996, and the arguments for and against the version of welfare reform that accompanied those policy changes. It is our hope that this publication alerts fair-minded legislators and other policymakers to the particular risks presented by welfare reform. GLBT activists and community members must also understand the importance of welfare policy to our entire community, and engage this critical policy debate as legislators now draft welfare reauthorization. All fair-minded Americans must take a second look at welfare reform and demand that policy makers amend it to ensure that children and families are not hurt, and that our commitment to equality under the law is not violated by these policies.

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