

The Courier-Journal

NEWSPAPER

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

SATURDAY, APRIL 15, 2000 • 50 CENTS

Baptist Homes could lose state contract

Policy on gays may cost group \$12 million

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The Courier-Journal

The Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children, which cares for abused and neglected youth across the commonwealth, could lose its \$12 million contract with the state unless it changes its policy toward homosexuals.

Such a loss would be a financial blow to the organization, which has a \$21 million annual budget, and it could force the state to place 358 children and teen-agers housed by the group with other providers.

Since Baptist Homes fired one of its workers in October 1998 because of her homosexuality, the Cabinet for Families and Children has urged the religious organization and Executive Director Bill Smithwick to

stop basing employment on sexual orientation, according to records obtained yesterday by The Courier-Journal under the Kentucky Open Records Act.

"While I understand that your agency is faith-based and feels obligated to follow the doctrines of the church, I would appeal to the administration of Baptist Homes for Children to re-examine its position on this issue," Bonnie Hommrich, deputy commissioner of the Cabinet, wrote to Smithwick in a letter dated March 5, 1999.

But Smithwick said yesterday that the board of directors met last month and decided to defend its position that employing homosexuals as counselors is "not the best way to care for troubled and abused children."

Smithwick said Baptist Homes will not inquire into sexual orientation during the hiring process nor investigate current employees' sexual practices. However, if a staff member

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acknowledges being homosexual, or if Baptist Homes finds out through other means, the employee will be fired, Smithwick said yesterday.

Letters between the state and Baptist Homes compare the practice to the military's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy.

Baptist Homes operates eight children's shelters and youth ranches across Kentucky, making it the largest private provider of such services in the state. Smithwick did not know how long the agency has had a state contract. He said Gov. Paul Patton has promised to meet with the board to discuss the situation.

Smithwick said losing the contract would be a significant blow, but Baptist Homes would continue to operate with church donations, grants and its endowment. Baptist Homes is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Church.

"We did it before we had state dollars and we will do it again," Smithwick said.

According to state documents, Baptist Homes had a \$10 million endowment as of August 1997. The Homes also receives income from more than \$10 million in trusts and other ac-

counts.

"The real loser is not the Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children," Smithwick said yesterday. "The real loser will be Kentucky's children because we've been here providing excellent care."

Rusty Chevron, a spokesman for Patton, said no final decisions have been made on whether to renew Baptist Homes' contract, which ends June 30.

"The entire situation is being reviewed by the Cabinet and the governor," Chevron said. "Our top concern needs to be what is best for the children."

The Homes traces its roots to 1866 when a group of women at Walnut Street Baptist Church in Louisville founded the Orphans Aid Society to care for orphans of the Civil War. Three years later, the first three children arrived at the Baptist Home for Helpless Children.

The agency has programs in Louisville, Glendale, Elizabethtown, Dixon, Morehead, Mayfield and Bronston. Last year, it served 3,800 children and adults.

Michael Jennings, a spokesman for the Cabinet for Families and Children, said Baptist Homes' policy regarding homosexual employees ap-



Said Baptist Homes Executive Director Bill Smithwick, "We are not gay bashers. We just want to present the very best role models we can."

pears to be based on religion, which poses a problem for the state.

"It can be construed as putting us in the position of endorsing — or at least through our funding — giving some sort of state sanction to a religious practice," he said.

Also, Jennings said, the social work professional code of ethics forbids discrimination on several grounds, including sexual orientation.

"If we continue to spend a lot of money to support the care of children in the Kentucky Baptist Homes, there is an appearance of complicity with an employment practice that is at odds with social work profession," Jennings said.

However, the state contract does not prohibit basing employment on

sexual orientation.

Baptist Homes fired Alicia Pedreira on Oct. 23, 1998, on the grounds that her "admitted homosexual lifestyle is contrary to the Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children core values."

Pedreira, of Louisville, was a therapist and supervisor at the Spring Meadows Children's Home in Middletown for emotionally disturbed children.

Pedreira was fired after a picture of her and her partner appeared in a photo contest at the Kentucky State Fair.

Pedreira became a symbol of discrimination in Louisville, and her story helped push the city Board of Alderman to adopt an ordinance in January 1999 that prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation.

However, religious organizations, such as Baptist Homes, are exempt from the ordinance.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Kentucky has scheduled a press conference Monday to announce it is suing Baptist Homes, said Eric Ferrero, with the National ACLU Lesbian and Gay Rights project in New York. Ferrero would not discuss the details of the suit.

Michael Adams, associate director

of the gay-rights project, said the state of Kentucky could also be named as a defendant, depending on whether the contract is renewed.

Although no final decision has been made to terminate the contract, Jennings said, the state has been assured that other private child-care providers that have contracts with the state can absorb the youth currently in the care of Baptist Homes.

In letters to Smithwick dating from November 1998 until last month, officials of the Cabinet for Families and Children expressed concern about the message Baptist Homes is sending.

"As treatment providers, it is imperative for your agency to gain a trust level with the children you serve in order to be effective," said a letter dated March 5, 1999. "This discriminatory policy you have adopted makes gaining this trust much more difficult."

Smithwick said he's not surprised that Pedreira's firing has had broader consequences. "This whole issue is driven by the homosexual political agenda that's sweeping this nation," he said. "This is not about what's best for children, but what's best for a political agenda."

Smithwick said some of the chil-

dren in the agency's care have been sexually abused or are confused about their sexual orientation.

"What adults do in their lives is their own business, but we place a high premium on role models for confused kids. And we just don't believe that children, many of them who are sexually confused, should have a role model that's openly homosexual," Smithwick said.

Dan Farrell, a spokesman for the Louisville Fairness Campaign, which for nearly a decade has pushed the city to adopt an anti-discrimination ordinance for homosexuals, yesterday praised the state for reviewing Baptist Homes' contract.

"I think it's great," he said. "One thing we've said all along is the state could fix this whole thing, and it looks like it's going to do that."

Smithwick said that since Pedreira was fired, Baptist Homes has provided diversity training to its employees regarding sexual orientation.

"We thought we were making progress," Smithwick said. "We are not gay bashers. We just want to present the very best role models we can."