

The Courier-Journal

ER • LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

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THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2001 • 50 CENTS

Baptist Homes prepares to do without state money

Agency that fired lesbian launches fund-raising drive

By PETER SMITH
The Courier-Journal

Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children is planning a national fund-raising drive that would allow it to operate without state subsidies rather than sacrifice its religious values, including its ban on gay employees.

Baptist Homes is seeking to capitalize on the national attention it has received as the defendant in an ongoing lawsuit filed by several Kentucky taxpayers over its 1998 firing of

MEETING: Kentucky Baptists choose middle ground in vote on statement of faith. **B1**

lesbian counselor Alicia Pedreira of Louisville.

The agency says having an openly gay employee conflicts with its belief that homosexuality is sinful. The plaintiffs, represented by the American Civil Liberties Union, contend that state funding amounts to government support of religion.

By January, Baptist Homes plans to begin limited fund-raising as a test for a larger drive.

See BAPTIST
Page 9, col. 1, this section

Baptist Homes plans fund-raiser after lawsuit over lesbian's firing

Continued from Page One

"We'd like to raise enough money in the next three to four years that we can tell the state: 'Keep your money, we'll still serve your kids,'" Baptist Homes President William Smithwick said to the applause of members of the Kentucky Baptist Convention at its annual meeting this week at Murray State University.

The commonwealth has continued to refer children to Baptist Homes and to send subsidies to the agency.

"We want to continue to cooperate with the state," Smithwick said in an interview yesterday. "It's not that we're just trying to pull away."

But if the courts or the state decides public funds shouldn't go to a religious agency, "and we think probably one day it will, we may have to break ranks with public funding."

If the state stops referring children to Baptist Homes, Smithwick believes that referrals from private parties, as well as schools and courts, could make up the difference.

"We'll find kids to serve," he said.

In fact, with referrals already dropping, the agency also hired a marketing director to seek new referrals, Smithwick said.

Mike Jennings, a spokesman for the Cabinet for Families and Children, wouldn't comment because the state is a defendant in Baptist Homes' federal lawsuit.

Jennings did say, however, that referrals to all private child-care providers are down. That's because the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 states that children removed from their parents should be placed as promptly as possible into a foster or permanent home, rather than in group homes such as those operated by Baptist Homes.

"We are doing this across the board," Jennings said.

The Pedreira lawsuit is being watched nationally as a test case to determine if government support of faith-based social services amounts to public support for religion. President Bush has sought to expand such subsidies.

Jeff Vessels, executive director of the ACLU of Kentucky, declined to comment yesterday because of the pending lawsuit.

ACLU attorney David Friedman said if the ACLU wins its lawsuit, Baptist Homes "may very well lose their state funding."

Baptist Homes didn't seek national notoriety, but it hopes to take advantage of it, Smithwick said, using mailing lists of people who have donated to similar causes. Groups opposed to Baptist Homes' employment policy also have used the lawsuit to raise funds.

While the appeals will be sent nationally, Smithwick said he expects most new support to come from within Kentucky.

"We're testing right now and believe there are numbers of people across the country and particularly in Kentucky who are going to say, 'Bill, Kentucky Baptist Homes, we commend you for standing up against the agenda of the ACLU, we commend you on your stand for holding traditional family values high and we want to ... help support you,'" he told the convention.

Since the 1970s, the state has contracted with Baptist Homes to care for abused and neglected children. With a network of shelters and care centers, it is Kentucky's largest private provider of child-care services.

But in recent months, referrals of children have decreased, forcing the agency to lay off nine employees and close one of its cottages. While most of the decrease is because of state policy changes over the handling of troubled children, Smithwick said he believes social workers are partly

avoiding the agency because it bars homosexual employees.

Baptist Homes went to the brink last year with the Cabinet for Families and Children, rejecting a state contract that would have required changes in its employment policy. Gov. Paul Patton intervened, telling state social workers to consider only the best interests of the children in deciding whether to refer children to the Baptist agency.

Staff writer Chris Poynter contributed to this story.

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of Baptist Homes