

KENTUCKY BAPTIST HOMES' FIRING OF PEDREIRA

Your April 15 article on the ACLU suit against Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children (KBHC) raised six serious questions about religious liberty and the provision of public social services in Kentucky.

First, why does the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics specify nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation? The code addresses discrimination against many groups, including persons of color, women, persons with disabilities and the poor. All are persons whose normal life struggles are made more complicated by society's prejudices and discrimination, a reality that must be considered in responsible helping.

Second, would social workers ever support the firing of a gay or lesbian service provider? Of course, if the firing were for unacceptable job performance, the same standard applied with a straight social worker. Alicia Pedreira's job performance has

never been in question.

Third, did the firing of Pedreira affect youth receiving treatment at KBHC? Absolutely! Your article rightly described youth in residential treatment as often having experienced significant abuse — physical, emotional and/or sexual — in their young lives. Such abuse commonly leads to survivor confusion, often related to sexual identity. Healing requires a safe space for youth to speak openly about their confusion with qualified counselors. KBHC's firing of Pedreira solely on the basis of orientation makes impossible open communication about this topic.

Fourth, does the KBHC suit mean that one cannot combine conservative or "fundamentalist" beliefs with social work? Social workers are in fact a diverse profession, with Baptists and Jews, Catholics and atheists, secular humanists and Buddhists, some affiliated with religious groups and others

staunchly independent in their spiritual lives. Many social workers identify their spiritual beliefs as their primary motivation for entering the profession. However, as with all professions, social workers are required to make a clear distinction between their personal beliefs and their professional practice. Respect for diversity is at the heart of all helping.

Fifth, is KBHC being held to a higher standard than other faith-based agencies? Absolutely not! All faith-based human service agencies must distinguish between issues of faith and policies governing secular services they provide to the general citizenry. Beliefs shape what services faith-based agencies choose to offer. For example, you won't find Catholic agencies in the family planning or abortion business. Once an agency decides to accept public funds for providing services to the general citizenry, it foregoes the right to proselytize and enforce its religious be-

liefs on its clientele.

Sixth, can gay citizens be proper role models for the community's children? As a married Catholic woman with three children, I would happily name Jack Kersey and Carla Wallace as models worthy of any youth's emulation. I could name many more models for my children, but in a world dominated by "don't ask, don't tell," I would be endangering my friends. Look at what happened to Pedreira when someone learned she was gay!

In our personal lives, we can believe what we want. But beliefs are not the sole determinant of public behavior. Some may believe, for religious reasons, that women should stay home and care for their children, but they cannot discriminate against women in the workplace. Some may believe, for religious reasons, that persons of color are different from so-called "whites," but they cannot discriminate against per-

sons of color in housing, employment and public accommodations. And whatever one thinks, for religious reasons, about sexual orientation, our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters similarly deserve fair treatment in their public lives.

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A bad role model?

The Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children justifies not allowing employees found to be gay to keep their jobs because they "want to present the very best role models" they can. They fired a lesbian because her picture with her partner was in the newspaper. How did this make her a bad role model for children, who don't even get to see the paper?

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