

NATIONAL NEWS

Senator to drop anti-gay clause in faith-based initiative

by Lou Chibbaro Jr.

A Republican senator who is sponsoring President Bush's faith-based initiatives bill said he will drop language adopted by the House of Representatives last month that would allow federally funded religious charities to refuse to hire gay workers.

Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.), in a briefing with reporters on Wednesday, Aug. 1, said the controversial language adopted by



Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) said the anti-gay language in the House version of the bill threatens to kill the measure in the Senate.

the House threatens to kill the faith-based initiatives measure in the Senate. "He wants to remove that issue and move on with the bill," said Robert Traynham, Santorum's press spokesperson.

The language to which Santorum was referring would exempt religious charities that provide federally funded services to the poor — such as soup kitchens, AIDS treatment facilities, and drug addiction rehabilitation programs — from having to comply with state and local civil rights laws, including gay civil rights laws.

The House defeated a Democrat-sponsored motion two weeks ago that sought to remove the anti-gay language along with separate language allowing federally funded religious charities to refuse to hire workers who are not members of their own religion.

All but four Republicans voted against the motion while nearly all Democrats voted for it. A group of moderate GOP House members, who initially planned to vote for the motion, said they changed their minds on the issue after the White House and House Republican leaders assured them they would address the issue of anti-gay bias during a House-Senate conference committee.

Among the House members voting against the motion was openly gay Rep. Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.). Kolbe, a longtime supporter of gay civil rights, said he sup-

ports the underlying faith-based bill and voted against the motion to delete the anti-gay language only after being assured that the language would be removed during a conference committee later this year. Kolbe and other moderate House Republicans also said they opposed the Democrat-sponsored motion because of the religion provision, saying they believe religious charities should be allowed to limit their workforce to employees who are members of their religion.

Santorum's remarks came at a time when Senate Democrats have said they would not allow a faith-based initiatives bill to pass unless the anti-gay language is removed. Democrats won control of the Senate earlier this year, putting them in charge of the Senate's legislative agenda.

Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), a longtime advocate for allowing religious charities to perform government-funded social services programs, has said he plans to introduce his own version of a faith-based initiatives bill that will not include language pre-empting local and state civil rights laws.

Traynham and Dan Gerstein, a spokesperson for Lieberman, said the two senators urged President Bush to agree to support efforts to remove the anti-gay language from the House version of the bill during a July 26 meeting with Bush at the White House. Gerstein

said Lieberman told him the president expressed an "openness" to "fix" the language in question but did not make a specific commitment on the issue.

The White House released a statement Aug. 2 saying Bush is "pleased that Sen. Santorum and Sen. Lieberman share his commitment to helping Americans in need" and that the Bush administration "looks forward to further discussions" on the Santorum proposal.

Rep. Mark Foley (R-Fla.), one of the four GOP moderates who voted for a motion in the House to delete the anti-gay language, praised Santorum for "leading his colleagues in the right direction."

"The president should join Sen. Santorum and many other Republicans in preserving state and local non-discrimination laws," Foley said. The other Republican House members who joined Foley in voting for the motion to delete the anti-gay language were Reps. Connie Morella (R-Md.), Christopher Shays (R-Conn.), and Jim Leach (R-Iowa).

Rich Tafel, executive director of the national gay group Log Cabin Republicans, praised Santorum for joining what Tafel called a "broad public agreement" between the White House, House Republican leaders, and a contingent of moderate House Republicans "to settle the questions over civil rights issues by working together." ▼