

136-3

Metropolitan

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2001

The Washington Times

MARYLAND

Values coalition will go after efforts backing gay rights bill

By Margie Hyslop
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

A group that has played a key role in fighting homosexual rights measures in California says the battle over a Maryland referendum on homosexual rights is a next frontier.

The Anaheim-based Traditional Values Coalition will work as hard to prevent the "Anti-Discrimination Act of 2001" from becoming the law in Maryland as it did to make Proposition 22 the law in California, said spokesman Phil Sheldon.

Proposition 22 — which limited marriage to a union between a man and woman — got the approval of 61 percent of California voters in 2000 and galvanized activists on both sides.

The Maryland measure forbids discrimination based on a person's sexual orientation in housing, employment and public accommodations, but includes a statement that it is not to be construed as legitimizing homosexual marriage.

After the legislature approved the bill this spring, TakeBackMaryland — a grass-roots group of conservatives who contend the measure is a way to silence their opposition and force acceptance of homosexuality — gathered enough signatures to put it to referendum in 2002.

Advocates — including homosexual, bisexual and transgender activists in Baltimore and most of Maryland's 23 counties — then filed a lawsuit to stop the measure from going on the ballot.

Their suit seeks to strike almost 4,000 signatures with arguments that they weren't properly witnessed or that signers were not provided a required summary of the legislation.

About 1,500 of those signatures may be subject to review after a special master appointed to consider the claims issues a report this week, said Charles Butler, attorney for the plaintiffs.

see VALUES, page B2

VALUES

From page B1

Mr. Sheldon of the Traditional Values Coalition said all this effort to keep the measure from voters makes Gov. Parris N. Glendening and others who support it "look like Southern governors of old" who stood in school doors to keep black students out.

"Christians, Muslims and Orthodox Jews are being told, 'You can't come in here,'" Mr. Sheldon said.

About the same time homosexual rights activists filed suit to stop the referendum and accused opponents of fraud in gathering petition signatures, TakeBackMaryland co-founder Tres Kerns said his complaints of harassment by homosexual rights activists were being ignored by police and state leaders. And he asked U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft to investigate.

Mr. Kerns' telegram to Mr.

Ashcroft stated that he "received a death threat . . . hate mail, a hit-and-run car assault [and] fraudulent letters sent out under [his] name."

Mr. Kerns also said hackers who he believes are homosexual rights sympathizers altered words and spellings on TakeBackMaryland's Web site to make the organization look unprofessional. He also said they subscribed him to pornographic Web sites.

Advocates for the anti-discrimination measure dispute those accusations.

"We certainly have not sent them any such thing, nor do we have knowledge of anyone that has, nor have we encouraged it," said Liz Seaton, deputy field director of the Human Rights Campaign, a national homosexual, bisexual and transgender rights organization. The group supports the Maryland law in partnership with state and local counterparts such as the Free State Justice Campaign.

Both sides are raising money for what they expect to be a pitched and

expensive battle.

Blake Humphreys, Free State Justice Campaign executive director, said he expects good response from an appeal to supporters to donate their tax refunds to the cause. He said \$7,000 was raised at the first tax-refund party.

And the homosexual rights group is working to schedule town meetings at churches so they can talk to congregants about the measure.

Churches were also a battleground in Maine where voters rejected a similar anti-discrimination law in November.

Although Mr. Kerns said his group has only raised about \$2,000, his counterparts in Maine were also outspent — and won.

In Maine as in Maryland, polls showed more than 60 percent of voters backed the homosexual rights measures.

Mr. Kerns said he's determined to make every candidate in Maryland's 2002 election, in which all state offices are on the ballot, take a stand on the issue.