

Sept 20 2005 - Coming to a Head Start Program Near You: Discrimination?

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Ranking Member, Rules Committee Democrats Object as Republicans

Sanction Religious Discrimination in Head Start Program

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY), Ranking Member of the House Rules Committee, led Rules Committee Democrats in objecting to an amendment today of the School Readiness Act of 2005, or the "Head Start Bill." The amendment authored by Rep. Charles Boustany (R-LA) and included in the rule by Republican Committee Members, will allow Head Start programs run by churches, religious institutions and faith based charities to use tax payer dollars to discriminate in their hiring practices on the basis of religion.

"I can't, for the life, of me understand why our government would ever get in the business of sanctioning workplace discrimination, much less the funding of it with federal dollars," said Rep. Slaughter. She added, "Congress should be leading the fight against discrimination not propping it up with financial support."

Rep. Slaughter and other Democrats on the Committee argued that by passing the Boustany Amendment not only would Congress be condoning discrimination but a broad based bipartisan coalition of support for the Head Start Bill would be obliterated.

The legislation passed in committee unanimously, without the Boustany Amendment included. If the Amendment passes, the much of the bi-partisan support is expected to evaporate.

The full house will vote on the Head Start bill sometime tomorrow.

BACKGROUND:

Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, religious organizations may discriminate in hiring on a religious basis with private funds, but not when the position under consideration is funded with taxpayer dollars.

The provision of the Head Start Act prohibiting discrimination in hiring has existed since 1972. That provision has never prohibited faith-based organizations from receiving Head Start funds. All the provision does is assure that government funds - which are collected from taxpayers of all faiths - will not be used to support religious discrimination.

This long-standing anti-discrimination provision has not put a burden on any religious organization. In fact, the committee has received no testimony from faith-based organizations that this amendment is needed in order for them to continue to participate or to expand their participation in Head Start.

A unique feature of the Head Start program is that it enables parents to climb up the economic ladder by moving from Head Start volunteer to paid Head Start teacher. But adoption of this amendment would block countless parents from climbing this ladder out of poverty - simply because the parents do not share the religious beliefs of the federally funded employer.