

Atheists say cancer volunteering thwarted

by [Piet Levy](#)

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(RNS) The American Cancer Society has rejected an atheist group's bid to field a national team to raise money for cancer research, and organizers suspect it's because of the volunteers' godless beliefs.

Todd Stiefel, who channels tens of thousands of dollars to atheist causes from his Raleigh, N.C.-based Stiefel Freethought Foundation, had wanted to organize as many as 100 teams for the ACS' Relay for Life under the banner of the Foundation Beyond Belief. Stiefel said his family would match up to \$250,000 raised by the national teams.

After getting an initial nod from the ACS, Stiefel said the charitable group told him in August that it would not support a national team or help keep a tally of donations raised by local relayers.

The American Cancer Society said a relay team sponsored by the Foundation Beyond Belief didn't fit its new policy that organizes national teams only from corporations, not nonprofit groups.

Devoting staff to a noncorporate national team program was "sapping some energy and time" and not delivering the desired revenue to justify the support, said Reuel Johnson, national vice president for the ACS' Relay for Life.

This is the second time Stiefel has had trouble donating to a prominent nonprofit group, which makes him wonder if atheist money is tainted. Last March, the Mississippi branch of the ACLU turned down \$20,000, saying too many people "tremble in terror at the word `atheist.'"

Stiefel's philanthropy includes a grant to Religion News Service to support coverage of atheists and humanists.

Stiefel had applied for the national team model so the ACS could help organize local teams under the banner of the Foundation Beyond Belief and keep track of how much money the local teams had raised.

Stiefel appealed the rejection, arguing that the foundation is a corporation, but was denied. An idea to start a youth affiliate program was also rejected, he said.

"I know we're being treated differently than other nonprofits, but I don't know why," Stiefel said. "My beef is if they eliminated the noncorporate program, why would they not find any alternative way to establish a national team or something that was equivalent, considering the huge matching challenge?"

Johnson said the ACS is still willing to accept Stiefel's donation. Even though the national noncorporate team program had ended, volunteers and a designated liaison could help support and unify local Beyond Belief teams.

The youth program, Johnson said, is designated for national youth organizations like the Girl Scouts.

Greg Donaldson, national vice president of communications for the ACS, said it is simply "not true" that the ACS would not help calculate the fundraising tallies for the local teams, and said he's unsure what the "real agenda is here."

"We're anxious and excited and willing to work with Mr. Stiefel and any organization. ... Every conceivable organization type has worked with us on Relay. That's why it's been so successful. It would be suicide to conduct differentiated treatment with any organization."

The back-and-forth has been a hot topic in the atheist blogosphere.

Hemant Mehta, a Beyond Belief board member, blogged about the situation on the Friendly Atheist blog on Sept. 8, which prompted a small but vocal band of supporters to post comments on the Relay Facebook page like "Cancer doesn't discriminate, why should ACS?"

The next day, Johnson posted an open letter and said ACS desired an agreeable resolution. Last Wednesday (Sept. 28), Stiefel responded with his own open letter on Friendly Atheist.

"I was trying hard to do something wonderful," he wrote. "Instead, my efforts have been frustrated by inequity. ... It is unfortunate that we must move on, but we will find another group and save lives with a charity that shows appreciation for donors and gives equal recognition."

In March 2010, the Mississippi chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union rejected Stiefel's \$20,000 gift through the American Humanist Association to underwrite an alternate prom for Constance McMillen, who sued her school district after she was barred from attending her prom with her girlfriend.

"Although we support and understand organizations like yours, the majority of Mississippians tremble in terror at the word `atheist,'" ACLU Mississippi fundraiser Jennifer Carr wrote in an email to the head of the AHA.

Following media reports, the Mississippi ACLU apologized for Carr's "inappropriate email" and Stiefel's donation was eventually accepted.