

Judge approves settlement in Baptist children's home case

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July 7, 2014

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(RNS) A federal judge has approved a settlement in a 14-year legal battle over government funding of Baptist homes for children in Kentucky.

The lawsuit started in 2000 when Sunrise Children's Services fired a staffer, Alicia Pedreira, after discovering she was a lesbian. The agency, formerly known as Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children, also was sued by Pedreira and other taxpayers who claimed government money was being used for services "infused with the teachings of the Baptist faith."

Pedreira's employment discrimination claims were dismissed in the courts, but in 2009 the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals permitted the portion of the suit alleging that state-funded activities advanced religion to continue.

"Children will be protected against any kind of religious coercion, discrimination or proselytization in child care placement centers funded by the state," said Alex Luchenitser, associate legal director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, of the June 30 decision.

"Importantly, the agreement does not indicate there were any Establishment Clause violations by the Commonwealth or Sunrise," said U.S. District Court Judge Charles R. Simpson III of Louisville, who called the case a "long and winding road."

Sunrise was not a party to the settlement but unsuccessfully tried to halt the agreement between the plaintiffs and the state. Under the agreement, Kentucky officials must commit to ensuring that religious preferences of children in their care are respected. The judge said the agreement, which changes the way the state works with child service providers, did not have to satisfy Sunrise.

Sunrise officials could not be reached for comment, but John Sheller, an attorney for Sunrise, told The Associated Press that Sunrise intends to appeal Simpson's decision.

Luchenister said he hopes the case, the oldest active lawsuit involving his Washington-based watchdog group, will soon conclude. "We're optimistic that we're going to defeat the appeal," he said.