

Federal agency settles suit over religious abstinence program: Religious components must be separate for Silver Ring Thing

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The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has agreed to stop funding an abstinence program that included religious elements.

The American Civil Liberties Union announced February 23 that the settlement had been reached between its lawyers and federal officials in a case involving the Silver Ring Thing abstinence education group in Moon Township, Pennsylvania.

“We are pleased that the government has agreed to stop using taxpayer dollars to fund the Silver Ring Thing’s religious activities,” said Julie Sternberg, a senior staff attorney with the ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project.

Court papers described presentations that included students reciting an abstinence pledge and wearing a silver ring inscribed with a reference to Bible verses from 1 Thessalonians: “God wants you to be holy, so you should keep clear of all sexual sin.” Sternberg said that the ACLU supports the right of the program “to offer religious programming, but it may not do so using government funds.”

According to the settlement, HHS officials have agreed not to fund the abstinence education program of Silver Ring Thing as it was structured under the terms of a 2005 grant. If Silver Ring Thing applies for additional grants between now and 2008, those officials have agreed to ensure that funding is not used for “inherently religious activities.”

The suit filed by the ACLU last May said the government had awarded more than \$1 million to Silver Ring Thing over three years. HHS’s Family and Youth Services Bureau suspended funding of the program in August after concluding that “it appears that the federal project that is funded under the SRT grant includes both secular and religious components that are not adequately separated.” –*Religion News Service*