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Feds yank gay health site

Agency says info 'beyond scope' after conservative criticism

By ANDREW KEEGAN

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LESS THAN TWO weeks after a conservative Christian organization complained to a top government official about a federal website that contained health resources for gay men and lesbians, the information disappeared.

But the government maintains it was simply a coincidence as the web pages were already in the process of being removed as part of an agency overhaul.

The Family Research Council sent a letter Jan. 11 to Michael Leavitt, secretary of Health & Human Services, complaining that pages on the agency's Substance Abuse & Mental Services Administration website contained "biased, politically-charged language such as condemnations of so-called 'homophobia' and 'sexual prejudice.'"

The website, www.samsha.gov, was taken offline Jan. 21, and the information pertaining to gays removed. The information had been online for six years.

Family Research Council officials did not respond to requests for comment, but the group sent a letter to Leavitt thanking him for "responding to our concerns."

In the letter, FRC president Tony Perkins said while the website information was inappropriate, "I do understand the need for special material addressing the substance abuse problems of these populations, given that even homosexual advocacy groups acknowledge the rates of such abuse are higher within these groups than in the general population at large."

One organization that had been listed as a resource for gays on the website blasted DHHS for deleting the material.

"We've been given three different answers on why the resources were removed," said Jean-Marie Navetta, media manager for Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays. "And since they all came from the same agency, it doesn't add up."

"The whole purpose of the DHHS is to provide information and resources for health issues, and that information needs to be community appropriate," Navetta said. "Just like women's health has an eye on different issues than men's health."

THE GAY-RELATED web pages should have been removed two years ago, said Mark Weber, SAMHSA associate administrator.

"We began a process to clear up old web pages and in looking at this LGTB pride site, it fell beyond our scope," Weber said. "It even had a pop-up quiz to measure homophobia—totally unacceptable."

The timing of the deletion and the FRC letter were not related, he said.

But last month Weber told Congressional Quarterly that it was only after being contacted by the FRC that the agency realized the website was an "LGBT pride site."

U.S. Rep. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.), the first and only open lesbian elected to Congress, is leading a House inquiry into the removal of gay-oriented health information from the SAMHSA website, according to her office.

"It is outrageous that an organization with a long track record of attacks on the LGBT community can successfully pressure a government agency to stop providing preventative health care information to LGBT Americans," Baldwin said in a prepared statement.

Baldwin is also circulating a letter among her colleagues condemning the actions of the government agency. The exact number of congressional members who have signed the letter was not available at press time, according to Jerilyn Goodman, Baldwin's press secretary.

The letter seeks an explanation regarding the HHS decision to take down the website and asks the agency to restore the site as soon as possible, Goodman said. It also warns against any revisions to the content that would distort gay citizens and their health needs, such as equating "homosexual conduct" with "significant health risk," she said.

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