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Thursday, October 20, 2005

The Democratic Faith Working Group today issued the following statement opposing restrictions, supported by the Republican majority, on non-profit organizations that apply for grants through the Affordable Housing Fund established in H.R. 1461. The provisions disqualify any non-profit organization, including faith-based groups, that engage in voter registration, voter identification, get-out-the-vote, and other non-partisan voter participation activities from being eligible for the Affordable Housing Fund grants.

“The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said, ‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.’ As citizens of our great nation, we are called to stand up for those who cannot always stand up for themselves. Dr. King reminds all of us that faith, justice, and democracy do not live in a vacuum. We must continue to nurture those worthy ideals. We must also fight for them.

“These Republican provisions strike at the very core of our democratic ideals. The Republican modifications to the legislation restrict organizations from participating in the affordable-housing fund if they have engaged in non-partisan election-related activities such as voter registration drives.

“The right to vote is a hallmark of our country’s democracy. We should commend the efforts of those who attempt to foster that patriotism in others, not punish them and the populations they serve. These provisions are anti-American and, at best, represent a failure to respect and understand the scope and mission of our faith-based organizations.

“In a letter to Speaker Dennis Hastert, more than 60 faith-based and non-profit groups expressed their commitment to affordable housing but raised their overwhelming objections to the proposed additions: ‘The low income housing community has worked tirelessly to establish the Affordable Housing Fund in H.R. 1461, because we know the dire need for funds to increase the nation’s affordable housing stock. But nothing is worth compromising the right of all Americans to participate in our precious democracy.’”

FULL TEXT OF LETTER FROM 60 FAITH-BASED AND NON-PROFIT GROUPS:

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS OPPOSED TO VOTER RESTRICTIONS IN H.R. 1461

*c/o National Low Income Housing Coalition
727 15th St., NW, 6th Floor
Washington, DC 20005
202-662-1530*

October 19, 2005

The Honorable Dennis Hastert
Speaker
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. Speaker,

The undersigned national organizations have learned that the compromise reached by House Leadership on H.R. 1461, the Federal Housing Finance Reform Act of 2005, includes provisions that would restrict the ability of American citizens to engage in our democratic process. We urge that these provisions be removed before the bill comes to the House floor for a vote probably during the week of October 24.

Specifically, we object to the restrictions on non-profit organizations that apply for grants through the Affordable Housing Fund established in H.R. 1461. The egregious provisions, which we strongly oppose, disqualify any nonprofit organization that has engaged in voter registration, voter identification, get-out-the-vote, and other nonpartisan voter participation activities in the 12 months prior to application from eligibility for the Affordable Housing Fund grants. It further prohibits non-profit organizations that receive grant funds from engaging in these activities.

These grants are to be used solely to produce and preserve housing that is affordable to extremely low and very low income families. For the first two years, the funds will be prioritized to rebuild housing in the areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The anti-democratic provisions do not just prohibit the use of Affordable Housing Fund dollars from being used for these purposes. The prohibition applies to any resources of a grantee, including funds specifically for civic engagement activities.

Moreover, even if a particular non-profit organization does not itself engage in any of these activities itself, "affiliation" with an organization that does would disqualify the nonprofit from applying for Affordable Housing Fund grants. Notably, for-profit companies are exempt from these restrictions.

These provisions are blatantly undemocratic and raise substantial constitutional questions in the attempt to limit the rights of affiliation. They are intended for no other purpose than to reduce access to voting by low income people. People of color are overrepresented in the low income population, making this a civil rights issue. Moreover, these provisions have serious implications for the broader nonprofit community by setting a very dangerous precedent.

The low income housing community has worked tirelessly to establish the Affordable Housing Fund in H.R. 1461, because we know the dire need for funds to increase the nation's affordable

housing stock. But nothing is worth compromising the right of all Americans to participate in our precious democracy.

Sincerely,

Alliance for Healthy Homes
Alliance for Justice
American Counseling Association
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
American Network of Community Options and Resources
Americans for Democratic Action
Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN)
Campaign for America's Future
Center for Community Change
Center for Law and Social Policy
Child Welfare League of America
Children's Defense Fund
Cities for Progress at the Institute for Policy Studies
Coalition on Human Needs
Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities
Corporation for Supportive Housing
Enterprise Foundation
Environmental Working Group
Episcopal Church
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
Leadership Conference on Civil Rights
Local Initiatives Support Corporation
Lutheran Services in America
Mercy Housing
National AIDS Housing Coalition
National Alliance of HUD Tenants
National Alliance on Mental Illness
National Alliance to End Homelessness
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
National Association of Housing Cooperatives
National Coalition for the Homeless
National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy
National Community Reinvestment Coalition
National Council on the Aging
National Council of Nonprofit Associations
National Council on Independent Living
National Fair Housing Alliance
National Head Start Association
National Health Care for the Homeless Council
National Housing Conference
National Housing Law Project
National Housing Trust
National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty
National Low Income Housing Coalition

National Neighborhood Coalition
National Policy and Advocacy Council on Homelessness
National Urban League
OMB Watch
Poverty and Race Research Action Council
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Washington Office
Public Housing Authorities Directors Association (PHADA)

RESULTS

Smart Growth America
Stewards of Affordable Housing for the Future
Technical Assistance Collaborative
The Arc of the U.S.
U.S. Public Interest Research Group (U.S. PIRG), National Association of State PIRGs
United Cerebral Palsy
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries
Women's Committee of 100
YWCA USA