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Taking HRC's money

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Once again, the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition (MTPC) is being called upon to respond to controversy. In the past, we've defended our community against attack from outside. This time, we're being criticized for having accepted a grant of \$25,000 from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) towards our work to pass H.B.1722, "An Act Relative to Gender-Based Discrimination and Hate Crimes".

We appreciate the concerns and sincerity of those who disagree with our decision. It was not made lightly. We weighed the criticism we knew we'd receive against the good that this money would do for our community, and, after careful deliberation, chose to do what we feel is best for our community.

MTPC's mission is, among other things, to obtain protections for transgender and gender non-conforming people throughout the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Currently, we are fortunate to have won some respect in the courts, but legislatively, we have legal protections only in Cambridge, Boston and Northampton. The vast majority of our constituency lives every day at relatively extreme risk of job loss, discrimination, harassment and violence. History has shown that, more often than not, crimes can be committed against us with near impunity -- although, thankfully, this is changing.

Passage of H.B.1722 will be the most beneficial achievement for our community that our organization has accomplished to date. But it is not a done deal, not by a long shot. As the events of last fall with respect to transgender inclusion in ENDA showed us, we have not yet won the hearts and minds of most lawmakers. But we are winning them.

For years, the transgender community in Massachusetts has patiently waited for the civil marriage rights issue to be resolved before embarking on a quest for our most basic rights. We waited at the request of our GLB allies, and out of our own sense of rightness. Now the issue is resolved, and with that resolution, there are now resources available that were previously needed elsewhere. MTPC is grateful that our work for the passage of H.B.1722 has won some of these resources.

MTPC is well aware of the ongoing dispute between transgender activists and HRC. We are not pleased with the actions of HRC with respect to ENDA, and are a member of United ENDA and led the Massachusetts Coalition for a United ENDA. We've strongly lobbied both HRC and Rep. Barney Frank for transgender inclusion. We are continuing as a strong ally in the effort to pressure HRC to include gender identity in ENDA, and will continue to do so. Taking their money does not oblige us to overlook their bad behavior. This is not lobbying money, where tit for tat is expected. This is a grant for the passage of H.B.1722.

While some may fear that our acceptance of this money provides HRC with bragging rights for how it is helping transgender folks, we'd like to see it set a precedent for what HRC will do in other states. Surely Massachusetts is not the only state whose transgender activist effort can benefit from a grant of this nature. We challenge HRC to follow this grant with money to other states, so that, in the absence of federal protections, more transgender persons can look forward to statewide protections. But let us be clear: Some states will not soon pass gender identity protections, and the only hope for our community in those states is the federal ENDA. So this state-level money is *no substitute* for transgender-inclusion in the federal ENDA.

The steering committee of MTPC was unanimous in our decision to accept the HRC grant. It helps establish our legitimacy as an organization and encourages others to donate to our efforts. It imposes no constraints upon us and incurs no obligation on us. Most importantly, it enables us to engage our first full-time employee to work on passage of H.B.1722, enhancing our ability to secure passage of this legislation that will protect all members of our community, most for the first time. The marriage equality fight in Massachusetts required millions of dollars and many full-time staff persons to win. We may win our rights with less, but we need every bit of help we can get. We know that the opposition to same-sex marriage was fierce; we can only hope that opposition to our rights will be less.

Bottom line: We don't know what the future holds, but this money could well save lives by helping pass H.B.1722 sooner rather than later. If this grant saves the blood of one transgender person, then it will be blood money of the best sort -- lifeblood, that is. As for those who take exception to HRC's transgender-exclusive action on ENDA, we're right there with you. But let's not cut off our nose to spite our face. Rather, let's take their money, and show them how to use it properly.

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