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NATIONAL news

NORTH CAROLINA

Republican U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms, who holds the distinction of being the most anti-gay member of Congress, announced Aug. 22 that he will retire in 2003. He has held this office for three decades.

"It is our sincere hope that the retirement of Sen. Helms marks the end of an era of anti-gay activism in the Senate," said Winnie Stachelberg, Human Rights Campaign political director. "Suffice it to say, [he] will not be missed."

Just a few examples of Helms' anti-gay actions through the years:

- 1987: In a letter to Sen. Lowell P. Weicker, Helms stated: "The only way to stop AIDS is to stop the disgusting and immoral activities that continue to spread the disease."

- 1990: Helms offered an amendment to the Hate Crimes Statistics Act that stated "the homosexual movement threatens the strength and survival of the American family" and "state sodomy laws should be enforced."

- 1993: During the confirmation process for Roberta Achtenberg, President Bill Clinton's nominee for assistant housing secretary, Helms said his reason for opposing her was "because she is a damn lesbian."

- 1998: Helms stated, "The New York Times and the Washington Post are both infested with homosexuals themselves." Continuing to refer to homosexuals, he added: "These people are intellectually dishonest in just everything they say and do. They start by pretending that it is just another form of love. It's sickening."

PENNSYLVANIA

A prominent social justice organization has come out against hate crimes legislation that would add protections based on real or perceived sexual orientation, gender and disability.

In a new publication, the American Friends Service Committee describes the bill as "seriously flawed" and in need of further review. In a *Time of Broken Bones: A Call to Dialogue on Hate Violence and the Limitations of Hate Crimes Legislation* was made available to the public Aug. 13.

The document decries the use of penalty enhancements while supporting other aspects of such legislation. According to the committee, penalty enhancements historically have been applied in an unjust and disproportionate way against communities of color and have fueled the mass incarceration of working-class and poor people of color, particularly youth.

"We are concerned that many of these laws go in the wrong direction," said author Katherine Whitlock, special representative for gay, les-



Outgoing U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., bonds with movie star John Travolta

bian, bisexual and trans programs. "They expand the scope of the criminal justice system rather than strengthen civil and human rights. We believe the emphasis on penalty enhancements could produce consequences which are directly opposite to what was intended."

The committee supports such measures as data collection and training for law enforcement personnel. "We do feel data reporting should be mandatory and include incidents of hate violence on the basis of actual or perceived race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and mental and physical disability," Whitlock emphasized.

Winnie Stachelberg, Human Rights Campaign political director, called the committee's stance both unfortunate and confusing, as the current federal legislation does not have a penalty enhancement provision. She said her organization instead is focusing on the bill's broad bipartisan support on Capitol Hill.

FLORIDA

A ruling Aug. 30 by a federal judge upheld Florida's discriminatory ban on gay and lesbian adoptions.

James Lawrence King, senior judge for the Miami-based U.S. Southern District of Florida, agreed with the state's argument that the law was in the best interest of children, saying married heterosexuals provide children with a more secure home. "Plaintiffs have not asserted that they can demonstrate that homosexual families are equivalently stable, are able to provide proper gender identification or are no more socially stigmatizing than married heterosexual families," he said.

Lisa Bennett, deputy director of the Human Rights Campaign's FamilyNet, said the ruling is based on prejudice and is not in the best interest of children in foster care who are in need of permanent homes.

"The only way to determine what is in the best interest of a child is to make these important adoption decisions on a case-by-case basis," she said. "This unconscionable ruling blindly takes this discretion away from family experts and prohibits adoption by gay parents, even if it is determined to be best for the child."

On a somewhat more positive note, King rejected the state's assertion that the law banning gay adoptions is valid because it signals the state's disapproval of homosexuality. "The court cannot accept that moral disapproval of homosexuals or homosexuality serves a legitimate state interest," he wrote.

A spokesperson for Gov. Jeb Bush said he supports the ruling. Florida is the only state to statutorily ban gay and lesbian individuals from adopting.

MASSACHUSETTS

In formal filings Aug. 13 with Attorney General Thomas Reilly, Gay and Les-



Judge James Lawrence King thinks married straight couples provide children with a more secure home