

# Affirmative action opponents stymied in the states

By Amy Wood  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Across the country, conservatives are realizing that affirmative action will not easily be eliminated through state legislative action.

Despite sharp attacks in the courts and reports that state legislators from coast to coast are preparing to eliminate state affirmative action programs, during 1996 and 1997 only 13 states actually introduced such legislation, and none of these bills was successful. And only one state, Washington, expects to have an initiative similar to California's Proposition 209 on the ballot in 1998.

Events this year show that affirmative action is still very much a viable force in America. In fact, those working to repeal affirmative action on the state level see themselves engaged in a difficult and potentially unsuccessful struggle.

Hopefully, this news will end the widespread perception that the foes of affirmative action constitute, as *The New York Times* put it in November 1997, "a national movement that has

often seemed to have the momentum of an unstoppable freight train."

It was a prominent report in the *Times* a year earlier, along with stories in other papers, that left the false impression that almost half the states were on the verge of eliminating their affirmative action programs.

In November of 1996, Sam Howe Verhovek of *The New York Times* wrote that 26 states had introduced anti-affirmative action legislation that year.

According to his assistant, Verhovek got the figures from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), a non-partisan organization that tracks state legislation. Yet, a closer look at the NCSL 1996 affirmative action report reveals that while 26 states introduced some form of legislation concerning discrimination and affirmative action, fewer than half that number of bills in 1996 actually sought comprehensive repeal.

Indeed, some of this legislation was offered to support anti-discrimination laws. Though

Verhovek correctly noted that "not a single bill passed," his numbers took on a life of their own.

This and other inflated estimates have had the effect of making the opponents of affirmative action appear stronger and more successful than they actually are.

Here are the facts: In the 1997 state legislative sessions, bills amending state constitutions or statutes to repeal affirmative action were introduced in Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Ohio, and South Carolina. The intent and wording of all of these are similar to Proposition 209, as they seek to "prohibit discrimination and preferential treatment based on race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin in public employment, public education or public contracting."

In every case in 1997, the bill or referendum was either "postponed indefinitely," or held in committee—the "graveyard" of legislation, as one bill sponsor commented.

While the situation is more precarious in

Washington State and Ohio, the sponsors in the remaining states lack confidence that their legislation will succeed any time soon.

Affirmative action opponents find themselves in the curious position of claiming that public opinion is on their side, and that the majority of Americans no longer want affirmative action, while their legislative and initiative efforts are thwarted due to lack of support or concern from voters, business and community leaders, and even fellow conservatives.

Efforts in Houston, Colorado, Florida and Georgia demonstrate that defenders of affirmative action can be successful.

"Not only public opinion, but momentum, is on our side," concludes Brian Komar of the Leadership Conference of Civil Rights.

In at least three states, Oklahoma, Missouri, and Michigan, the battle to eliminate affirmative action has been laid to rest, for now. The sponsors of anti-affirmative action bills in these states are

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## Diversion

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The classes last three months, but the youth stay in the program until they turn 18. After that, they can come back and start working with younger students and use the task force to find jobs. The group is to function as an extended family.

Wallace points out that more than 600 youth have turned their lives around with the program.

"We take the time and we're real with them," he said, explaining the formula for success.

Wallace stresses honesty.

"If you lie, then I can't trust you, and if I can't trust you, then what's the point of talking?" he said, adding that you can get booted from the program by lying.

"Used to have a major lying problem," he tells the youth. "But I stopped lying because I believe in God. If you lie to someone, it's because you're afraid of them. If I lie to you, I make you God."

Wallace doesn't bite his tongue about gang violence either.

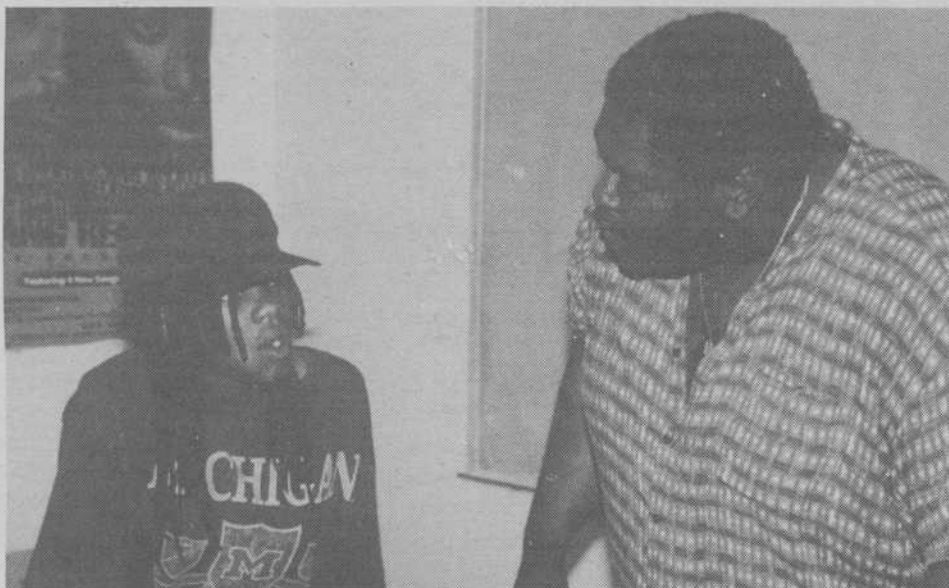
"Is it toughness for 10 guys to beat up on one guy standing alone?" he asked. "Is it weakness for one guy to stand alone, with integrity, for what he really believes in?"

Wallace uses slang, at first, to develop rapport with his charges and doesn't criticize their vernacular. Instead, he coaches them. Their language skills and their confidence are the beneficiaries.

"They sit taller in their chairs," he said, "and a brightness comes over them because someone really cares."

Wallace said parents should do their children a favor: Spend less time and money on computers and recreation and invest time in their children. He is married with two daughters.

Though he misses the



Presenting some ideas to La Toya Hill, Harry Thomas, assistant director of the program, enjoys having an open dialogue with the children.

Sentinel-Voice photo by Ramon Savoy

funding the police-backed department had and would like to get paid for heading the task force, Wallace said it's payment enough knowing he's making a difference in many young lives.

Many people agree. The Black Firefighters Association leases office and classroom space to the Task Force for \$50 a month, freeing up most of the \$800 per month for rent to be used elsewhere. Family Youth Services Judge Guzman and others in government also help and have endorsed the program.

Assistant Director Thomas said the initial skepticism about the program wears off once the youth realize how much he and Wallace care.

Twelve-year-old Terence Bowser says the program has helped him learn how to control his temper and stay out of fights.

Fifth-grader La Toya Hill says she had an attitude problem when she entered the program a few months ago, but that she has learned to be more responsible.

She said she will remember most Wallace and the other

caring adults who worked with her.

"One by one - that's our philosophy," said Wallace, explaining the method for helping children. As music director at KCEPFM 88.1, and

of the television show "Solutions," Wallace hopes to cut a compilation CD showcasing the youth he works with.

For more info or to find out how to help, call 226-6349.

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## Nation's mayors offer solutions via show

Special to Sentinel-Voice

A new locally produced television show is dedicating itself to covering stories of people turning their lives around and making a difference in their communities.

Airing 5:30 p.m. Sundays on Channel 13, "Solutions," a half-hour program hosted by Las Vegas Mayor Jan Laverty Jones, highlights citizens at their best.

The first segment, broadcast April 5, featured David Wallace, director of the Youth Diversion Task Force of America, a youth-empowerment group he co-founded with Harry Thomas.

Mayors from around the country are contributing stories and "solutions" about improving people's lives.

Television director Gary Bernstein and local promoter Bob Toles are co-producing the show through a new company they formed, Mayors' Media Solutions.

Toles compared the show to "Touched by an Angel" and "Promised Land" in its emphasis on the positive. Bernstein and Toles are showing the show to local television stations around the country. They hope it goes national next year and expands to an hour. Toles said response has been positive, nationally and locally.

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