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 Wayne Besen | Libby Post | OpEd | Letters

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## OpEd



### Get The Message

by Kevin Cathcart, Executive Director, Lambda Legal

Today we're sending Condoleezza Rice a World AIDS Day message. We're asking her to put an end to the U.S. State Department's discriminatory policy of not hiring people with HIV to serve in the Foreign Service. We've got the backing of many health experts and a petition signed by 17,000 people across the country asking Rice to change this policy. We hope she'll get the message.

Lambda Legal began the campaign to shed light on the State Department's discriminatory policy last summer after we filed our case on behalf of Lorenzo Taylor, who was turned away from the Foreign Service simply because he has HIV. For the record, Taylor is more than qualified to serve in the Foreign Service. He's fluent in three languages, has a decade of diplomatic work experience and easily passed the rigorous job-application process to fulfill the State Department's requirements. In April, we launched an online action campaign and took Lorenzo's story out into the streets at Pride celebrations throughout the country. Within a month we received more than 4,600 signatures, which we hand-delivered to the State Department.

Condoleezza Rice didn't get the message, so we ramped up the campaign. This time, along with the 17,000 signatures, we are delivering a letter to Rice signed by more than 40 prominent medical, scientific and HIV groups that have joined Lambda Legal's campaign. The letter calls the State Department's policy "grounded in assumptions about the frailty of people with HIV, without adjustment for revolutionary medical advances over the past two decades." It also calls the exclusion of people

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with HIV backward and unsound. Groups signing on to the letter include the National Association of People with AIDS (NAPWA), the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) and the American Academy of HIV Medicine.

The U.S. State Department implemented its blanket policy of not hiring anyone with HIV for the Foreign Service under President Ronald Reagan. That was more than two decades ago when we knew very little about the disease and when the treatments that were available were not always effective. Today people with HIV are living longer and healthier lives than ever. Lorenzo Taylor is in excellent health, and according to his treating physician needs medical monitoring only twice a year. The State Department's outdated position is further undercut by its own policy of allowing Foreign Service officers who test positive for HIV once they're already employed to stay in their jobs. In June, a panel of judges from the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia unanimously agreed with us and said that there was more than enough evidence for Lorenzo's case to go to trial. The trial is pending.

Unfortunately, Lorenzo's situation isn't unusual. In many ways we're dealing with the evolution of the same issues that have affected people with HIV since the beginning of the epidemic — policies based on fear and not science. Lambda Legal has been at the forefront of the battle to end HIV discrimination from the beginning. We won the first AIDS discrimination case in the nation in 1983, and helped win a Supreme Court ruling in 1998 that declared the Americans with Disabilities Act must also protect people with HIV. Now, we're using federal anti-discrimination law in our lawsuit to change the State Department's policy.

Last October as she was swearing in Mark Dybul (an openly gay man) as U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator, Condoleezza Rice called the fight to eradicate AIDS "one of the great moral callings of our time." It's true that we have a moral duty to prevent the spread of this disease and protect people living with it, but we have an equally strong responsibility to make sure that people living with HIV are not subject to discrimination based on fear and outmoded stereotypes.

Lorenzo Taylor is a clear example of a highly qualified, dedicated person who is being blocked from serving his country simply because he has HIV. This is not right. And that's the message we hope the secretary of state gets today.

*Kevin Cathcart is Executive Director of [Lambda Legal](#)*

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