

New tactic to curb hate groups: the courts - Civil rights groups are moving their fight out of statehouses and into courtrooms.

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As concern grows about the increasingly violent side of organized hate in the United States, civil rights groups are taking a different tactic in their fight.

They are attacking those espousing hate in the courts, trying to hit them where it can hurt the most: in the pocketbook.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, for example, is suing the Aryan Nations in Idaho. The law center, which has won multimillion-dollar settlements against the Ku Klux Klan and other racist organizations, hopes to put the Idaho group out of business by winning large civil penalties against Aryan Nations members who allegedly assaulted and terrorized a woman and her son last summer.

The darkest side of hate groups is being brought to light this week in a Jasper, Texas, courtroom where the trial involving the lynch-style murder of a black man is under way.

With states such as Wyoming (where a young gay man was murdered last year) failing to pass anti-hate-crime legislation, civil rights groups are moving from statehouses to courtrooms.

Other court cases

Among other cases around the country designed to clamp down on organized hate, a white supremacist Web site in Pennsylvania was shut down after the state attorney general filed a lawsuit accusing the site of issuing terroristic threats against state and local human-rights advocates.

In Illinois, a state panel that evaluates prospective lawyers for character and fitness has refused to grant a license to the leader of a white-supremacist organization called the World Church of the Creator.

Several lawsuits have been filed against public school districts around the country charged with failing to prevent attacks on gay students.

Meanwhile, there is growing concern about the "neo-confederate" movement in the South. Included here is the Council of Concerned Citizens, which seems to espouse race separation.

A column on the group's Web site last fall warned that any attempt to "destroy the race by a mixture of black blood is an effort to destroy Western civilization itself."

The council, which critics say sprung from the White Citizens Councils designed to fight desegregation in the South, recently made news with its connections to Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R) of Mississippi and Rep. Bob Barr (R) of Georgia. The two lawmakers have addressed the organization in the past, but deny knowing about the group's more controversial positions.

Southern heritage or hate?

Group leaders assert that promoting Southern heritage and being against affirmative action and court-mandated school desegregation does not equate to racism. But the Rev. Joseph Lowery, co-founder with Martin Luther King Jr. of the Southern

Christian Leadership Council, has called the group "the Ku Klux Klan with a coat and tie."

By no means is the issue limited to the South.

The Center for New Community, a faith-based community-organizing group in Oak Park, Ill., recently reported that there are 272 hate groups in the Midwest, including those with ties to Christian Identity (a religion that is anti-Semitic and racist), the Ku Klux Klan, and neo-Nazi activity.

Racist pamphlets have been showing up in Seattle suburbs, and here in Oregon an effort has begun to officially recognize the state's racist past - including a constitutional provision banning African-Americans that stayed on the books until well into the 20th century.

The police chief in Salem, Oregon's capital, recently announced that he would personally investigate why the city has not had any black police officers in the past 18 years.

While the Aryan Nations in Hayden Lake, Idaho, has a staff of perhaps no more than a dozen people, its message is being spread far and wide - particularly into prisons where many potentially violent racists are recruited into white gangs.

Prosecutors say the lead defendant in the Jasper, Texas, case came out of prison with many racist tattoos and hopes of attracting new members to a group he was forming, called the Texas Rebel Soldiers Division of the Confederate Knights of America.

In recent months, the Aryan Nations organization, reportedly funded by large donations from two California men who became wealthy in the high-tech industry, has sent out thousands of slick brochures and posters espousing its beliefs.

Such activity comes at a time when crimes based on race, religion, and sexual orientation are a growing concern among civil rights advocates and law-enforcement officials.

"There is a battle over whose America this is," Morris Dees, head of the Southern Poverty Law Center in Birmingham, Ala., told an audience at Westminster College in Salt Lake City last week.

But the effort to put hate groups out of business through the courts also raises questions about First Amendment rights to free speech. "The Bar of Illinois cannot certify someone as having good moral character and general fitness to practice law who has dedicated his life to inciting racial hatred for the purpose of implementing those views," wrote the panel in its recommendation not to grant a law license to Matthew Hale, the recent law school graduate who heads the World Church of the Creator. decision to deny Hale a license to practice law "sets a dangerous precedent."

"We are repulsed by Matt Hale, but we respect the principle of free speech and believe he is entitled to the opportunity to spew his venom without restriction," said Richard Hirschhaut, ADL's regional director in Chicago.

Caption: PHOTO: WHITE SUPREMACIST: Matthew Hale, of the World Church of the Creator, was recently denied a law license by the State Bar of Illinois. BY KARI SHUDA/AP

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