

U.S. can't list Westboro Baptist as a 'hate group'

by [Corrie Mitchell](#) in the [August 7, 2013](#) issue

In response to five “We the People” petitions, the White House condemned the actions of the Westboro Baptist Church but said it is powerless to list the Kansas church as a hate group and remove its tax-exempt status.

The White House response July 1 said the federal government does not maintain a list of hate groups, leaving that task to private organizations, such as the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center. Both have called Westboro a hate group.

Westboro Baptist Church, based in Topeka, Kansas, is best known for its graphic “God Hates Fags” signs and its continued picketing of military funerals.

The White House response mentioned that President Obama signed a 2012 law that restricts protesting within 300 feet of military funerals during the two hours before and after a service.

All “We the People” petitions that reach 100,000 signatures within 30 days receive a response from the White House. The White House can also choose to respond to petitions with fewer signatures.

The five petitions received 674,569 signatures; more than 413,000 supported listing Westboro as a hate group, and more than 260,000 asked the White House to revoke or investigate its tax-exempt status.

The petitions, which were all created last December following Westboro’s plans to picket the funerals of shooting victims in Newtown, Connecticut, question Westboro’s legitimate standing as a church, with one petition saying it “is better known for homophobic displays, suing people and picketing funerals than for providing Christian care to a community.”

Despite Westboro's controversial actions, the Supreme Court in 2011 ruled 8-1 in favor of the church's right to continue protesting, with Chief Justice John Roberts saying the First Amendment protects "even hurtful speech on public issues to ensure that we do not stifle public debate." —RNS

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