

Reid proposes federal antipolygamy task force: Accuses polygamous groups of organized crime

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Law enforcement officials from three western states have urged the creation of a federal task force to combat polygamy— a proposal that members of a polygamous sect called an attack on religious freedom.

The task force proposal is included as part of the Victims of Polygamy Assistance Act of 2008, which was introduced July 23 by Senate majority leader Harry Reid (D., Nev.), a Mormon and outspoken critic of polygamous groups.

The bill, which was before the Senate Judiciary Committee last month, aims to strengthen federal-state partnerships through sharing of information and tracking of criminal behavior of polygamist groups. The bill would also provide \$2 million in grants to both victims of polygamy and state investigation teams.

The proposal comes after a highly publicized raid at a polygamous compound in Texas in which more than 400 children were seized by state officials amid allegations of abuse. Most of the children have since been returned to their parents.

Warren Jeffs, the imprisoned leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS), and four of his followers were indicted July 23 in Texas on charges of sexual assault of a child.

Reid and others have accused the insular polygamous groups of “organized crime” involving child abuse, welfare fraud and tax evasion. Reid said that states—which typically handle such cases—do not have adequate resources to fully address the issue.

“The lawless conduct of polygamous communities in the United States deserves national attention and federal action,” Reid told the Judiciary Committee. He later compared polygamous leaders to mob bosses.

The proposal has support from the attorneys general of Texas and Arizona, as well as U.S. Attorney Gregory Brower of Nevada. U.S. Attorney Brett Tolman of Salt Lake City testified that a federal task force might be “too blunt an instrument” and suggested “subtler, more covert methods.”

FLDS representatives attended the hearing but were not permitted to speak despite prior requests to do so, their lawyer said. “Do you demonize an entire group for the allegations of a few?” asked Jim Bradshaw, a Salt Lake City attorney and FLDS spokesperson.

Former sect member Daniel Fischer told the panel that women are held like prisoners at FLDS compounds, while his sister, Miryam Holm, told reporters outside the hearing that “I am not a prisoner. . . . I am not there under duress.” -*Religion News Service*