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Girl Will Be Able to Participate in Spanish Fork Wrestling Tournament

SALT LAKE CITY -- For the second time in less than a year, the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah has resolved a dispute involving a girl's right to participate in a city-sponsored wrestling tournament. Today, the ACLU of Utah received written confirmation from Spanish Fork City attorney S. Junior Baker that Candace Workman, a 14-year-old middle school student from Vernal, Utah, will be able to wrestle in the city's December 4, 2004 tournament.

In late October, Candace and her family contacted the ACLU of Utah after learning that she would not be allowed to register in one of the tournament's boys' divisions, despite the fact that there were no other registrants in the newly created girls' division. Candace, who has wrestled competitively for seven years and has successfully participated in the Spanish Fork tournament in the past, could not understand why she was in effect being excluded from December's event.

Margaret Plane, staff attorney for the ACLU of Utah, contacted Spanish Fork City on behalf of Candace. In a letter to the city attorney, she noted that by banning girls from the wrestling tournament, the city was in violation of the Constitution's equal protection clause and possibly of Title IX, the federal statute prohibiting sex discrimination by any educational institution receiving federal funds. The Spanish Fork City Council considered the issue at its November 16 meeting and decided to rescind its discriminatory policy.

When told of the council's decision, Candace was excited that she would once again have the opportunity to compete in the Spanish Fork tournament. "I want to go down there and show them I'm just as good as the boys," she said. "It was wrong of them to try and exclude me like that." A two-time national championship winner, Candace has trained with the women's Olympic wrestling team and hopes to be a member of the United States Olympic team in the future.

Plane is also pleased that Spanish Fork chose to repeal its policy and hopes that the council's action is indicative of a change in how they view girls' participation in sports. "Sex discrimination cannot be justified based merely on the preferences of parents or others participating," Plane said. "Equal protection isn't concerned with preferences – it is concerned with ensuring that government does not perpetuate discrimination."

Almost a year ago, the ACLU of Utah received a similar complaint when it was contacted by two Utah County families whose daughters, ages six and eight, were prohibited from participating in a private invitational wrestling tournament held by the Orem Grapplers. Tournament organizers invited city-sponsored wrestling teams from Orem, Provo, Santaquin, Springville, Spanish Fork, and Payson, yet when the teams registered for the event, the girl wrestlers were told they could not compete.

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