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## Institute of Museum and Library Services Act (1996): News Article 02

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# Job Training Bill Trapped in a Philosophical Snare

## Eagle Forum Targets Bipartisan Legislation

By Judith Havemann

Washington Post Staff Writer

When Sen. Nancy Landon Kassebaum (R-Kan.) delivered a brief eulogy last October to a 31-year-old Democratic congressional aide who had died of cancer, little did she guess that she might be putting a death sentence on her own far-reaching job training legislation.

Although such tributes are customary, Phyllis Schlafly, president of the conservative Eagle Forum, detected something more than politeness in Kassebaum's praise of the "invaluable advice, assistance and suggestions" of the aide, Steve Spinner.

She discerned the hand of her arch-enemy, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.), and she got busy. Schlafly faxed out a seven-point "Eagle Alert" alleging that Spinner, who worked for Kennedy, was the bill's true author and that the innocuous-sounding legislation actually would put a federal bureaucracy in charge of what children learn in school.

"Senator Kassebaum paid tribute to him," Schlafly said in an interview. "He was the guiding light of the bill. He was making sure it was going in the direction of more federal control; the direction Senator Kennedy wants to go."

Despite Schlafly's charges, the House passed its version of the bill to consolidate the nation's more than

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— Rep. Pat Williams (D-Mont.)

90 worker training programs and to turn them over to the states last September 345 to 79; the Senate passed its version a month later, 95 to 2.

Having failed to prevent the bill's passage, Schlafly mobilized her supporters to block the bill at the next stage—when a handful of House and Senate conferees put together a final version. Today the legislation is fighting for its life in what staff aides refer to as "the conference committee from hell."

Democrats and Republicans agree that the fate of the job training bill illustrates how a seemingly noncontroversial measure can get caught in the maws of the ideological polarization that is blocking final action on health care reform, welfare reform and several other major pieces of legislation this summer.

To satisfy Schlafly the conference committee made dozens of changes in the bill, and now Democrats protest that it is unacceptable, senior congressional aides said. For Kassebaum, the legislation has become the victim of "two disparate but powerful political agendas" pushed by people on both the left and the right who find political accommodation less attractive now, as the November elections approach, than they did last fall when the process began.

Schlafly cannot be satisfied, Kassebaum said in a recent interview, because she has ulterior motives. Schlafly's real goal, Kassebaum said, is to see that the system will "stay bad" so she can come back and eliminate the entire Department of Education, a favorite target of the Eagle Forum.

While Schlafly organized a grassroots campaign, a conservative ally, Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.) rallied opposition on Capitol Hill, asking fellow Republicans to help defeat the bill because it dangerously expanded federal control of education.

Rep. Mark E. Souder (R-Ind.), a freshman conservative who has supported the bill, said Schlafly has been influential in the debate even though "all her facts are wrong." As one of the conferees, he went along with

numerous changes to satisfy Schlafly. But nonetheless, said Souder, Schlafly and other conservatives who share her views have "tapped into the core of our party through Christian radio and talk radio" and have gone after him relentlessly for refusing to recant his support for the measure.

"They have contacted all my major contributors, my district newspaper, written all kinds of letters, letters at home. A number of really strong supporters of mine are part of this. I feel like they don't trust me. They feel like I'm not listening to them."

Further dooming the legislation, Kassebaum said are the efforts of the Democrats. "Unfortunately, many Democrats see the demise of this bill as an opportunity not only to preserve the status quo and the individual interests it protects, but also to use it as fodder in the sound bites leading to the November elections," she said in speech on the Senate floor.

The Clinton administration, once a supporter of the legislation, has turned negative. Kennedy and a number of other Senate Democrats told Kassebaum in a letter they could not support the conference bill unless major changes are made.

A key element in the bill's seeming demise was Schlafly's success in portraying it as an instrument of big government.

Some of her fire was directed at the "work force development boards" that the bill would create to help coordinate job training programs. According to the bill's supporters, the boards would give all groups interested in job training—business leaders, workers, educators and others—the opportunity to sit down together and work toward common goals.

Schlafly said the boards would look at "kids in schools as little resources that need to be conformed to the global economy."

She also took aim at computer information systems that the bill's supporters say are designed to help people find jobs and to assess job training programs. Schlafly said the job training computers could easily be hooked up to school computer systems containing "academic, medical, personal, family, attitudinal and behavioral information" about students.

Rep. Pat Williams (D-Mont.), who is retiring after 18 years in the House, said, "in all that time I have never been part of a bill that started out with genuine bipartisanship only to watch it collapse in a frightening example of the power of the extreme right wing."

Labor Secretary Robert B. Reich said in an interview that the conferees have done so much to the bill to satisfy conservative activists that it represents a "major step backwards" from the administration's point of view.

Federal officials apparently would be stripped of their ability to oversee the billions of dollars in federal money that would be sent to states, he said.

Initially, the secretaries of Labor and Education had joint authority to approve state plans for spending federal funds. Now, said Timothy M. Barnacle, assistant secretary of Employment and Training, the bill relegates that role to one of "checking off boxes" rather than "negotiating between the federal level and the states over what they are going to do with federal dollars."

Furthermore, one of Reich's most important initiatives, "skill grants," or vouchers that workers could use to purchase job training, have been turned into "tiny little pilot projects," and a program to help students move from school to work would be repealed, Reich said.

The president, in a May 20 letter to Kassebaum, said he could not accept a bill without skill grants, school-to-work grants and accountability, and Senate Democrats echoed his requirements in a letter last week using many of the same words.

Reich said that he still had hope that the job training bill could be saved. He called it "simply untrue" that the administration is looking for an election issue, not legislation. A Democratic aide close to the conference committee said that if the bill emerges from conference committee in its current fashion, Kennedy will filibuster in the Senate, an action that could be fatal in the waning days of the 104th Congress.