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Family Research Council accuses Southern Poverty Law Center of sparking shooter's hatred

by Chris Lisee

WASHINGTON -- The head of the Family Research Council on Thursday (Aug. 16) accused the Southern Poverty Law Center of sparking hatred that led accused gunman Floyd Lee Corkins II to shoot a security guard at the conservative Christian lobbying group's headquarters.

FRC president Tony Perkins called the Wednesday shooting "an act of domestic terrorism."

"Corkins was given a license to shoot an unarmed man by organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center that have been reckless in labeling organizations as hate groups because they disagree with them on public policy," Perkins said.

The SPLC tracks domestic extremists and lists the FRC as an "anti-gay" hate group. On Thursday, Perkins called "an end to the reckless rhetoric that I believe led to yesterday's incident that took place right here."

The SPLC's Mark Potok called Perkins' accusations "outrageous," and said his group is committed to offering "legitimate and fact-based criticism."

"The FRC routinely pushes out demonizing claims that gay people are child molesters and worse -- claims that are provably false," Potok wrote on the SPLC's blog. "It should stop the demonization and affirm the dignity of all people."

Corkins, 28, of Herndon, Va., had volunteered at The DC Center, a gay advocacy group in Washington, D.C.

He has not been charged with a hate crime, but was found to be carrying symbols of a recent flare-up in the culture wars. Corkins was found to be carrying 15 Chick-fil-A sandwiches when he was arrested, along with a 9 mm pistol and 50 rounds of ammunition.

The fast-food chain's president Dan Cathy ignited an uproar in August when he voiced opposition to gay marriage. According to Chick-fil-A's website, the privately-held corporation's purpose is "to glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us. To have a positive influence on all who come in contact with Chick-fil-A."

NPR reported that Corkins was charged with a federal offense of transporting weapons and ammunition across state lines, and a District of Columbia offense of assault with the intent to kill while armed.

The local assault charge carries a maximum 30-year sentence, with a five-year mandatory minimum. The federal weapons charge carries a 10-year maximum sentence.

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Security guard Leo Johnson, who was unarmed, was shot in the arm. Perkins said Johnson was recovering after surgery Wednesday night. Johnson is employed directly by the FRC as a building operations manager and security guard.

Perkins acknowledged that a coalition of gay rights groups -- including the DC Center -- condemned the attack even before the suspect was named. "I was shocked to hear that someone who has volunteered with the DC Center could be the cause of such a tragic act of violence," said David Mariner, director of The DC Center.

"No matter the circumstances, we condemn such violence in the strongest terms possible. We hope for a full and speedy recovery for the victim and our thoughts are with him and his family," he said.

The American Family Association issued amplified the FRC's condemnation of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

"They have repeatedly and without cause demonized FRC, and have spent years stirring up anger in the homosexual community and directing that anger toward an organization whose only crime is to promote and defend the classic American values of faith, family and freedom," the group read.

"Thus according to SPLC's own standards, it is the SPLC that is to blame for yesterday's shooting."

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