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Clinton Seeks to Give Parents Standing To Create Basis for Discrimination Suits

By JEANNE CUMMINGS

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WASHINGTON—Renewing its courtship with "soccer moms" as the presidential campaign approaches, the Clinton administration will seek to create a broad new basis for job-discrimination lawsuits by classifying parents as a "protected class."

Under the proposal, parents would have the same standing to file discrimination cases as those who already fall under the legally protected classes of race, sex, age, religion or disability. Legislation will be sponsored by Democratic Sen. Christopher Dodd of Connecticut and is expected by the end of the month.

Business groups oppose the plan, arguing that it could prompt a flood of lawsuits when there is little evidence that a problem exists. They say disgruntled or poor-performing employees could exploit the new legal standing.

But White House Domestic Policy Adviser Bruce Reed says it is the product of "real cases." Among them is a New Jersey woman who claimed she was passed over for promotions because she is a mother. A New York federal judge rejected her lawsuit, saying the person who was promoted—who had no children—was of the same sex.

The White House acknowledges that its evidence is anecdotal, but Mr. Reed says that because such discrimination isn't illegal, "it is impossible to tell how many cases there will be. Like most cases of discrimination, employers don't advertise

their biases."

Mr. Clinton announced his intention to introduce such legislation in his State of the Union address; he recently expanded his fund-raising stump speech to signal that helping parents will be a major theme for Democrats in next year's elections. "We have not done enough in the U.S. to help people balance work and family," the president said Friday night at a Boston Democratic Party event.

The message dovetails with Vice President Al Gore's urban-sprawl initiative, which is aimed at reducing the time parents spend in traffic jams and creating more green space for families to enjoy.

Although the antidiscrimination proposal probably will face a frosty reception in the GOP-controlled Congress, the election-year dynamics could make opposition risky.

President Clinton's education proposals and criticism of former President Bush for vetoing the Family and Medical Leave Act helped him tap the middle-class soccer-mom vote in 1992. The Family and Medical Leave Act became the first bill signed into law by Mr. Clinton. The administration this year is expected to try to expand the now-popular law, which allows workers to take time off without pay to help sick or disabled relatives.

The White House is making no secret of its intention to make the fate of the parent antidiscrimination proposal an issue next year. "A truly pro-family Congress would pass this in a heartbeat," Mr. Reed says. "We'll see."

IRS's Handling of Whistle-Blower Shows Agency's Difficulty in Overhauling Itself

By KATHERINE ACKLEY

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WASHINGTON—The Internal Revenue Service's clumsy handling of a prominent whistle-blower last week shows the tax agency's difficulties in reforming itself.

Despite numerous pledges by top executives in Washington to give new protections to in-house critics against harassment, local officials in the IRS's Houston office threatened Thursday—the April 15 taxpaying deadline—to fire Jennifer Long, a revenue agent who gained national prominence when she testified about alleged abuse of taxpayers during 1997 congressional hearings.

But after word spread Friday to Senate Finance Chairman William Roth, who conducted the hearings, and to journalists nationwide, Ms. Long's managers withdrew the threat. The Delaware Republican branded the warning as "a clear act of retaliation."

IRS Commissioner Charles Rossotti sided with the critics, issuing a written statement late Friday that he "won't tolerate retaliation against employees who came forward to testify." He also promised an investigation.

IRS spokesmen, both in Washington and in Houston, refused to comment beyond Mr. Rossotti's statement.

Mr. Rossotti has won high praise from Mr. Roth and other legislators for his attempts to overhaul the tax agency since he took the helm in late 1997. But Mr. Roth has also warned that many employees of the 100,000-member bureaucracy would be resistant to change. As evidence, he has asserted in a new book that many witnesses at his hearing have been subject to a vicious internal backlash.

Ms. Long, a revenue agent since 1984, testified that IRS management encour-

aged many agents "to pursue tax assessments that have no basis in law from individuals who simply can't fight back. I do feel taxpayers' rights are being violated." Since then, Ms. Long said in a telephone interview Friday, she has been harassed and intimidated by her managers.

That culminated on Thursday when she was given a 13-page memo criticizing her job performance and was told she had 60 days to improve, or she would be out of a job. "They want to make a point: that if you criticize them, they'll get you. They'll take away your livelihood," Ms. Long said. "And the symbolism of doing it on April 15—it's outrageous."

Ms. Long said she believes the letter, the first step in the IRS's termination procedure, was sent because she taped television interviews—including one with ABC News—discussing claims of retaliation by her managers.

The 13-page memorandum from Karie L. Gulley, one of Ms. Long's managers, detailed Ms. Long's "ongoing performance deficiencies," including "ineffective planning" and "a failure to perform thorough and accurate work." The memo also offered 29 suggestions to shape up Ms. Long's work.

Ms. Long said she first contacted members of Congress in January 1997 and a month later received a reprimand for causing dissension and discord in the workplace. Until then, she said, she never received anything but positive performance evaluations. Since her testimony in September 1997, she said, most of her performance evaluations have gone from "fully successful" to failing.

Sen. Roth is planning a hearing in September to look into Ms. Long's and other witnesses' claims of retaliation.