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Settlement reached in ``Choose Life" license plate dispute

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July 7, 2006, 9:32 PM EDT

HARTFORD, Conn. -- Connecticut transportation officials have reached a settlement with a pro-adoption foundation that threatened to file a federal lawsuit after the state stopped issuing "Choose Life" license plates earlier this year.

The state Department of Motor Vehicles agreed on Friday to allow The Children First Foundation, based in Eastchester, N.Y., to continue sponsorship of the specialty plates, DMV spokesman Bill Seymour said.

State officials suspended the issuing of the plates in May pending an investigation into whether the group met the state's guidelines to sponsor such plates. Specifically, officials reviewed questions raised by state Rep. Roberta Willis, D-Salisbury, over whether the foundation has a "significant Connecticut presence," one of the criteria to sponsor a specialty plate in the state.

In response, The Children First Foundation threatened to sue in federal court if Connecticut failed to reinstate its license plate sponsorship status.

Seymour said the settlement requires the foundation to have an established base of operations in the state, which it said it already has, and a contact within the state.

"We've reached a settlement because we were interested in finding a way to ensure that we weren't aggregating anyone's First Amendment rights, so long as they followed the rules and regulations for having special interest license plates," Seymour said.

The DMV approved the group's request in 2003 to sponsor the specialty plates. About 200 "Choose Life" plates have been issued in Connecticut.

The foundation's co-founder and president, Elizabeth Rex of Yonkers, N.Y., said the group is pleased with the outcome.

"I really commend the Connecticut DMV because they did not discriminate, they played fair and we were very grateful they allowed us to apply for and were granted our plates," Rex said.

The foundation said it uses money raised by the plates to help pro-adoption and family friendly causes in the region.

It already has pending lawsuits in New York and New Jersey over those states' failure to authorize "Choose Life" plates. About a dozen states have already approved the specialty plates.

The foundation's Connecticut base is at the home of a group board member in the Gales Ferry section of Ledyard.

The plates, which started in Florida, have spawned controversy among some participants in the abortion debate nationwide.

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