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April 17, 2009

John Wheeler
Chair, National High School Mock Trial Championship
521 E Locust St, 3rd Floor
Des Moines, IA 50309

Via Facsimile (515-243-2511) and
Electronic Mail (jwheeler@iowabar.org)

Dear Mr. Wheeler:

We understand that part of this year's National High School Mock Trial Championship final is taking place on May 6-10, 2009 and includes Friday night and Saturday, which is the Jewish Sabbath. This means that many Jewish competitors, including those of the Maimonides School of Massachusetts, will be unable to compete. We further understand that the students and their sponsoring bar association requested an accommodation, but that it was denied due to a policy change at the National High School Mock Trial Championship which prohibits all such accommodations. These allegations are deeply disturbing.

We are shocked that, once again, your organization is denying a religious accommodation to Jewish Sabbath observant students, as it had in 2005, when your organization had initially denied (but later relented on providing) an accommodation to the students of the Torah Academy of New Jersey. As you are undoubtedly aware, subsequent to that incident the United States House of Representatives passed House Resolution 25, which called on your organization to accommodate students of all religious faiths. As House Resolution 25 admonished:

[T]he decision of the Board of Directors ... to refuse any future accommodations for students who observe their Sabbath on Friday and/or Saturday adversely and wrongly impacts observant Jewish, Muslim, and Seventh-Day Adventist students ... [and] is inconsistent with the spirit of freedom of religion or equal protection.

Regardless of the rationale for your decision regarding denying this religious accommodation in this case, it sets an extremely poor example for the students you are educating. Moreover, we think that denying the students the opportunity they have earned to participate in the championship is not a policy with which America's state bar associations ought to be associated.

As an organization that has been at the forefront of fighting prejudice and protecting individuals from religious discrimination for over 96 years, we urge you rethink this deeply troubling policy, which ensures that students will be forced to choose between adhering to their deeply held religious beliefs and participation in this important contest. We welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter further with you.

Sincerely,



Deborah M. Lauter
Director, Civil Rights

cc: Hon. Thurbert Baker
Attorney General, Georgia
Via electronic mail (tbaker@law.ga.gov)

Mr. Jeff Bramlett
President, Georgia Bar Association
Via electronic mail (bramlett@bmelaw.com)

Hon. George H. Carley
Justice of the Supreme Court
Member, Board of Directors National High School Mock Trial Championship
Via Electronic mail (carleyg@gasupreme.us)

Ms. Stacy Rieke
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