

■ LEGISLATURE

Black Caucus defends programs

Affirmative action backed by group

By Adam Bell

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It doesn't exist in law, but affirmative action needs enhancement, not elimination, the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus argued yesterday.

The caucus urged Gov. Tom Ridge and others to keep the state's affirmative action practices, which had been set down in executive orders by the two previous governors.

Rep. Ronald Gamble, D-Allegheny, unveiled a bill last month to abolish all affirmative action policies in state education, employment and public contracts. Gamble said the outdated programs usually discriminated against white men.

"Racism is alive and well in America, Pennsylvania and Harrisburg," said Rep. Andrew Carn, D-Philadelphia and a Black Caucus member.

Talk of curtailing affirmative action programs also is in vogue at the congressional level. And President Clinton last month ordered a review of government affirmative action programs.

Rep. Chris Wogan, R-Philadelphia, is introducing a bill similar to Gamble's. Wogan has defended such action, saying it is not racist because it seeks to end race as a criteria in state action.

The caucus has no specific plan to combat the legislation. Members said they simply wanted to prove that affirmative action, which addresses past discriminatory practices or policies, still has not achieved satisfactory results.

They cited statistics they said showed that minorities are underrepresented in state government. For example, while minorities comprise 12 percent of the general population, 95 percent of state construction contracts last year went to whites, with only 5 percent going to minorities.

Caucus members also criticized the number of minorities in House and Senate staffs. One caucus member, Rep. Joseph Preston, D-Allegheny, also criticized the number of minorities other caucus members hired.

Members insisted they did not want any type of quota system or set-aside program.

They said laws prohibiting discrimination require equal opportunity, not preferential treatment. And those laws protect women, people with disabilities, gays and others, not just blacks.

"We are disturbed by the false facts and assumptions that opponents would have you believe, such as white males are being adversely affected by affirmative action," said caucus Chairman Rep. Harold James, D-Philadelphia. "Yet they are the group that have been given preferential treatment most often."

Ridge wants lawmakers to proceed cautiously on the issue. He has kept a 1988 executive order by former Gov. Robert P. Casey that prohibits discrimination and supports affirmative action.