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Man's halt of interracial marriage sparks outrage

By MARY FOSTER
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NEW ORLEANS -- Louisiana's governor and a U.S. senator joined Friday in calling for the ouster of a local official who refused to marry an interracial couple, saying his actions clearly broke the law.

Keith Bardwell, a white justice of the peace in Tangipahoa Parish in the southeastern part of the state, refused to issue a marriage license earlier this month to Beth Humphrey, who is white, and Terence McKay, who is black. His refusal has prompted calls for an investigation or resignation from civil and constitutional rights groups and the state's Legislative Black Caucus.

Republican Gov. [Bobby Jindal](#) said in a statement a nine-member commission that reviews lawyers and judges in the state should investigate.

"Disciplinary action should be taken immediately - including the revoking of his license," Jindal said.

Bardwell did not return calls left on his answering machine Friday.

Bardwell has said he always asks if a couple is interracial and, if they are, refers them to another justice of the peace. Bardwell said no one had complained in the past and he doesn't marry the couples because he's worried about their children's futures.

"Perhaps he's worried the kids will grow up and be president," said Bill Quigley, director of the Center for Constitutional Rights and Justice, referring to President Barack Obama, the son of a black father from Kenya and a white mother from Kansas.

Obama's deputy press secretary Bill Burton echoed those sentiments.

"I've found that actually the children of biracial couples can do pretty good," Burton told reporters aboard Air Force One as it flew to Texas.

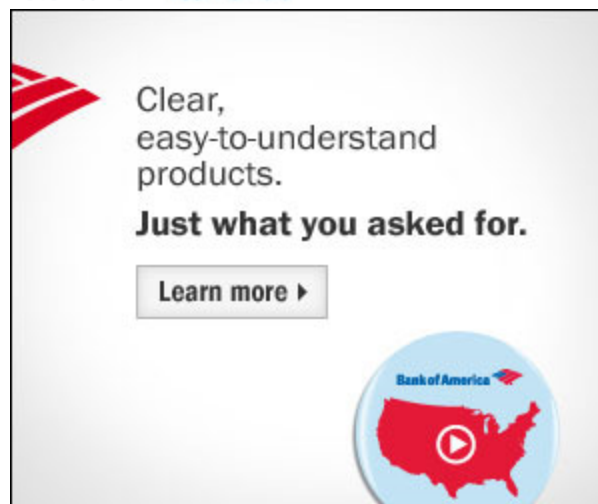
Humphrey and McKay were eventually married by another justice of the peace, but are now looking into legal action against Bardwell.

Humphrey said she called Bardwell on Oct. 6 to ask about a marriage license. She said Bardwell's wife told her that Bardwell would not sign marriage licenses for interracial couples.

Bardwell maintains he can recuse himself from marrying people. Quigley disagreed.

"A justice of the peace is legally obligated to serve the public, all of the public," Quigley said. "Racial discrimination has been a violation of Louisiana and U.S. law for decades. No public official has the right to

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pick and choose which laws they are going to follow."

A spokeswoman for the Louisiana Judiciary Commission said investigations were confidential and would not comment. If the commission recommends action to the Louisiana Supreme Court, the matter would become public.

U.S. [Sen. Mary Landrieu](#), D-La., said in a statement Bardwell's practices and comments were deeply disturbing.

"Not only does his decision directly contradict Supreme Court rulings, it is an example of the ugly bigotry that divided our country for too long," she said.

Tangipahoa Parish President Gordon Burgess said Bardwell's views were not consistent with his or those of the local government. But as an elected official, Bardwell was not under the supervision of the parish government.

"However, I am certainly very disappointed that anyone representing the people of Tangipahoa Parish, particularly an elected official, would take such a divisive stand," Burgess said in an e-mail. "I would hope that Mr. Bardwell would consider offering his resignation if he is unable to serve all of the people of his district and our parish."

Bardwell, a Republican, has served as justice of peace for 34 years. He said he has run without opposition each time, but had decided earlier not to run again. His current term expires Dec. 31, 2014.

Associated Press writer Eileen Sullivan in College Station, Texas, contributed to this report.

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