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## Meeting discusses issues surrounding Red Cross affiliation

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# Meeting discusses issues surrounding Red Cross affiliation

**By Melanie Morin**

*For The Maine Campus*

A General Student Senate resolution passed last April that encourages student organizations not to associate with the American Red Cross because of accusations of gay discrimination which have caused concern over campus blood drives.

Associate Dean for Students Kenda Scheele held a meeting yesterday in the Bumps Room of Memorial Union to discuss how to handle this issue.

The controversy stems from a Food and Drug Administration policy originating in 1983. The policy prohibits all men who have ever had sex with any other man since 1977 from donating blood. Since this time, technology has reduced the risk of contracting HIV through blood donations to about one unit per

two million donations, according to the Red Cross Web site. Because the FDA establishes guidelines for all blood donors, no blood collecting agency, including the Red Cross, can choose not to use this criterion when screening potential donors.

So why point fingers at the Red Cross if they are simply following FDA regulations?

The Red Cross has been an outspoken supporter of the FDA policy, and when the policy was last reviewed in 2000, testified in favor of keeping it as-is.

"If the Red Cross had not supported the policy, it would have been changed," said Kyle Webster, current UMaine graduate student and Coordinator of Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Services, or GLBT.

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# BLOOD

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Only seven people attended the meeting besides Scheele: Webster, Sarah Bigney of the Progressive Student Alliance; David Kujawa, president of Wilde Stein; Sheri Baxter, vice president of the Association of Graduate Students; and Mary Skaggs, Lynn Dexter and Serena Bemis-Goodall, all of Student Employment and Volunteer Programs.

Scheele arrived about 10 minutes late and left shortly after because of a phone call she said was an "emergency." Webster and Bigney, who were the most involved in the project last year, had to leave early for classes. The 3:30 p.m. time slot did not work for them or other people.

"There's a lot of people who should be at the meeting who are not here," Webster said, as he tried to respond as best he could to specific questions he was not able to fully answer.

There was also very little publicity for the event, with only one FirstClass posting by Scheele last Tuesday in the campus announcements folder.

This situation led to much confusion and debate about the actual FDA policy, about the GSS resolution and concerning the role of the Red Cross and little actual progress about how to now go about blood drives. Skaggs said Student Employment has continued to use the Red Cross for their

blood drives but does not want to ignore the desire of the GSS to disassociate with them. With the most recent blood drive on Sept. 21 and 22, donors came in the largest numbers in three years — 293 donors on both days.

Skaggs expressed concern that if the only other blood collection agency in the state, Eastern Maine Blood, was used for blood drives, then they were not going to be able to handle as many donors. It was widely agreed upon that if it was a choice between using the Red Cross or donating less blood, then the Red Cross should be used.

"They're kind of the only game in town that can handle this volume," Skaggs said. "We need not overlook the need."

However, Derek Mitchell, a student senator who led the fight against the Red Cross last year, but who was not able to attend the meeting, tried to clear misconceptions in an e-mail.

"I took the opportunity to meet with senior staff members of the Eastern Maine Blood Program, who assured me that their company had the capacity to meet the need of blood drives of our size, with appropriate advance time," Mitchell said.

Though the number of blood donors at the most recent campus drive did not seem to be affected by the presence of the Red Cross, the number of volunteers was. Bemis-Goodall said she was unable to find enough volunteers to help out at this past event because of its association with the Red Cross.

There was also much specu-

lation at the meeting about a relationship, if any, between Eastern Maine Blood and the Red Cross, and whether blood collected by Eastern Maine Blood ends up in the hands of the Red Cross eventually anyway. It was speculated that Eastern Maine Blood sometimes receives assistance from the Red Cross at their blood drives. These accusations were neither proven true nor false at the meeting, but they contributed to the idea that the Red Cross could not be completely excluded from university blood drives.

"Either way you go, you're going to be dealing with the Red Cross," Baxter said.

According to Mitchell, these accusations are false. Mitchell said Coral Blood Services is the organization that serves as the blood provider for the Eastern Maine Medical Center but that, "Coral and the Red Cross are two distinct organizations, not connected in any way."

The meeting closed with a general agreement that lobbying and joining with other school, fighting for the same cause would be the most effective way to result in a change in FDA policy. Mitchell said this process has been under way.

"We are joining together with students from other universities and have been since the conception of this resolution last semester," he said. "I've worked with Student Government leaders at the University of New Hampshire who passed a similar resolution last year while drafting this one-



CAMPUS PHOTO BY KEVIN REARDON

**THICKER THAN WATER** — Kyle Webster from Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Services and David Kujawa, the president of Wilde Stein, listen to proposals concerning the Red Cross.

and remain in contact with them as the situation develops."

There was not any concrete decision as to whether the Red Cross should or should not be used for blood drives. Student Employment and Volunteer

Programs already have another blood drive with the Red Cross scheduled in mid-November. Greek Life, however, has a blood drive scheduled for the beginning of November with Eastern Maine Blood.