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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **National Civil Rights Group Urges University of Illinois to Retire Racist Symbol**

Montgomery, AL — The Southern Poverty Law Center, an organization that monitors bias incidents across the nation, called on the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign today to eliminate its stereotypical and demeaning mascot, Chief Illiniwek.

“Every year, more than 500,000 college students across the country are the targets of bias-driven slurs and physical assaults,” said Brandon Wilson, the head of the Center’s college outreach program. “The University of Illinois shouldn’t contribute to the problem by officially sponsoring a racist symbol.”

In April 2000, the Center’s legal director sent a letter to University of Illinois Board of Trustees charging that the University’s school symbol violated federal civil rights law. “The consistent use of racial caricatures violates both Title II and VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964,” the letter explained.

In March 2004, University of Illinois trustees will vote on whether to retain Chief Illinwek as the school mascot. Voting to keep the symbol would communicate trustee support of a racist image, Wilson said.

“We call on the University of Illinois to retire Chief Illiniwek, both because it is required by law and because it is the right thing to do,” said Wilson. “It’s time for the University of Illinois to join other forward-thinking schools that have retired their offensive mascots.”

Located in Montgomery, Alabama, the Southern Poverty Law Center is an organization dedicated to fighting hate and promoting tolerance. Its investigative division monitors more than 700 racist groups and tracks hate crimes. Its educational projects provide civil rights activists and classroom teachers, including more than 25,000 in Illinois, with tools for promoting tolerance.

In 2003, the Center published 10 Ways to Fight Hate on Campus. More than 30,000 copies have been distributed on campuses across the country.

For more information contact Brandon Wilson, outreach associate for the Southern Poverty Law Center, at 334.956.8200.

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