



Activists call for a shift in priorities

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By Ethan Jacobs

Want to see broader focus on Social Security reform, health care access and rights for polyamorous families

What do novelist Dorothy Allison, Princeton University professor Cornel West, "sexpert" Susie Bright, *Families Like Mine* author Abigail Garner, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel, *Nickel and Dimed* author Barbara Ehrenreich, *Stone Butch Blues* author Leslie Feinberg, *Tikkun* magazine editor Michael Lerner, *Tales of the City* author Armistead Maupin and feminist icon have in common?

They all signed a controversial document released last week calling on LGBT-rights organizations to shift their focus from civil marriage rights for same-sex couples to a broader focus on legal recognition of "a wide range of relationships, households and families," including polyamorous relationships and greater access to "health care, housing, Social Security and pension plans, disaster recovery assistance, unemployment insurance and welfare assistance" for all "regardless of marital or citizenship status."

Depending on who you ask, the July 26 release of "Beyond Same-Sex Marriage: A New Strategic Vision for All Our Families and Relationships" was either an effort to expand dialogue about the direction of the LGBT movement or the latest shot fired in an internal war between LGBT activists who support the push for same-sex marriage and those who oppose it. The statement was drafted by a core group of about 20 activists, scholars and writers including Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice executive director Katherine Acey, *The Nation* writer Richard Kim and American University law professor and Valuing All Families author Nancy Polikoff. An additional 250 activists, authors and gay-friendly public figures signed the manifesto.

Joseph DeFilippis, executive director of Queers for Economic Justice and one of the group of activists who drafted the document, said the statement is not meant to oppose same-sex marriage. Instead, he said, it's meant to oppose a push for same-sex marriage as the only mechanism to protect families formed by LGBT people. "The idea is a menu of options of family recognition, of valid forms of family, and we are very clear in the document about our support for gay marriage, but our disagreement is that this issue is the win that we need for our community, because it will only protect part of our community," said DeFilippis.

Among the types of households and families that the statement argues are left out of the same-sex marriage debate are senior citizens who live together and care for each other, single-parent households, LGBT couples who join with other singles or couples to bear and raise children together, blended families and people in polyamorous relationships.

The statement was released the same day as the Washington Supreme Court ruled against the right of same-sex couples to marry in that state, one of a string of legal defeats for the same-sex marriage movement over the past month that also included high-profile losses in New York and Georgia. DeFilippis said that while drafters hoped to release the statement in the summer to coincide with the several same-sex marriage rulings expected to be released over the summer, the timing with the Washington decision was purely coincidental.

The reaction from activists working on the frontlines of the same-sex marriage movement has been mixed. Evan Wolfson, executive director of the national Freedom to Marry and co-counsel on the *Baehr v. Miike* Hawaii marriage case, viewed the document as a direct attack on the same-sex marriage movement, and he accused the document's drafter's of pushing an agenda different from that of the more than 250 activists who signed onto the statement.

"I think there's a difference between a lot of what's in the document and what many of the signers are signing onto and how it's being portrayed by a smaller group that have their own agenda," said Wolfson. "I think that the general document and the general aspirations and what many of the signatories believe in is a commitment to the marriage work and other family recognition work that is very important."

But he added that he believed the "smaller set" of activists publicizing the document "have a much more intense anti-marriage position than either the document itself or the signatories subscribe to."

Wolfson, who was shown an early draft of the document that he said was something "we could all sign onto," believes that activists who are "anti-marriage" are using the statement to take "another run at generating a new wave of stories when there's nothing new here."

He disputed that the national LGBT movement had made marriage its be-all, end-all goal. "What organization, Lambda Legal, GLAD, the ACLU, HRC, the Task Force, what organization supposedly isn't working on a range of these questions?" said Wolfson. "In fact the groups are working on a range of fronts, far more than some of the signatories."

Jay Smith Brown, director of communications strategies for the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), also dismissed the charge that the LGBT movement had become a single issue movement. "I think in a lot of ways the work that all of us are doing has a benefit that's beyond marriage and beyond just same-sex couples," said Brown. He pointed to HRC's advocacy against constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage; one of HRC's main arguments against the amendments is that they impact far more than same-sex couples, and in an April 2005 report the organization cited the 2004 Ohio constitutional amendment among others, which has been used by one court to deny domestic violence protections to unmarried heterosexual couples and by employers to deny domestic partner benefits to all unmarried employees.

Yet others feel that the goals laid out in the document and the marriage equality movement are compatible. **"Of course we share its values, and I think it's values and its aspirations are something that gay and straight people can embrace, because our nation needs to find ways to protect the reality of the America family, which is far beyond one man and one woman, or two men or two women," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "This really isn't a gay issue, it's an American family issue. Yes, we deserve marriage equality for hundreds if not thousands of reasons, but we also at the same time can be working to protect other forms of family relationships. It's not an either/or situation and it never has been."**

And Robyn Ochs, a board member of MassEquality and co-founder of both the Bisexual Resource Center and the Boston Bisexual Women's Network, signed onto the document after being approached by bisexual activists working on drafting it, and she said she does not see it as a critique or a challenge to the same-sex marriage movement but rather "as a loving reminder that marriage equality, while crucial, is one of many issues we need to continue to address." She said she hoped the statement would not divide the community and that her "hope is that we remember who our real enemies are," and she believes the fight for same-sex marriage and the fight for expanded benefits and protections to different family configurations are compatible.

"I think they both are important. For example, with regard to access to health coverage, it's my strong belief that every single person in this country should have free and high quality healthcare. That's my long-term goal. However in the short term we still need to fight for domestic partnership benefits on our health plans. One doesn't preclude the other," said Ochs. "We have to both think about the future and respond to the realities of

now."

Yet while Foreman and Ochs believe the statement is not oppositional in tone to the LGBT marriage movement, there are passages of the statement that clearly suggest some dissatisfaction with the current thrust of the LGBT movement. A section discussing the efforts by conservative activists to dismantle social programs reads: "This bad news is further complicated by a segment of LGBT movement strategy that focuses on same-sex marriage as a stand-alone issue. Should this strategy succeed, many individuals and households in LGBT communities will be unable to access benefits and support opportunities that they need because those benefits will only be available through marriage, if they remain available at all ... Rather than focus on same-sex marriage rights as the only strategy, we believe the LGBT movement should reinforce the idea that marriage should be one of many avenues through which households, families, partners, and kinship relationships can gain access to the support of a caring civil society."

And at least some of the drafters of the statement clearly intend it to be a critique of the movement. Richard Kim, a writer for *The Nation*, said the impetus for the statement came from discussions among several of the eventual drafters of the statement at the Task Force's 2005 Creating Change conference.

"It really was this kind of, folks finding each other who had these views and felt sort of left out of the direction, not just of the marriage movement," but of the LGBT movement as a whole, said Kim. He said the drafters met for two days in April to hash out the document and then spent the next two months working long-distance to write it collectively. He said they spent the weeks before the statement was released showing it to potential signers, including Wolfson and others working on the forefront of the marriage movement, who with few exceptions declined to sign it.

DeFilippis also said the document was meant to critique the direction of the LGBT movement. He said by pushing for benefits for diverse family structures he believes the LGBT movement can forge alliances outside of the LGBT community.

"One of the goals is to literally change the strategies and the organizing efforts and the legal efforts of our movement away from this single issue focus and to reach out beyond our community," said DeFilippis. "I feel like a lot of the losses we've had is because we've framed it as a single issue, a gay couples issue.... There are many communities that are not queer communities that would benefit from a broader definition of family."

DeFilippis added that critics of the statement have focused primarily on the support for polyamorous relationships, and he expected that to be used against the document by conservative opponents of LGBT rights. He said critics of the support for polyamory from within the community misunderstand the goal of the statement. "I want to be clear that this is not about pushing for polyamorous relationships per se. This is about separating church and state from the recognition of family and that the state has no business in determining what makes a valid family," said DeFilippis.