



Gay Rights Groups Have Mixed Reactions to Passage of ENDA

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By Bryan Ochalla

The U.S. House of Representatives successfully passed the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) yesterday by a vote of 235 to 184. Although the vote marks the first time either chamber of Congress has passed employment protections based on sexual orientation, reactions from gay rights groups have been mixed.

"Today, we witnessed the making of civil rights history in the U.S. House of Representatives by the passing of ENDA," Human Rights Campaign President Joe Solmonese said in a release. "This vote by Congress is an important step at ensuring that millions of gay and lesbian Americans will never again have to go to work in fear of losing their jobs because of who they are."

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Inc., on the other hand, saw yesterday's vote in a slightly different light.

"We are deeply disappointed that House leadership decided to ignore the position of a vast majority of LGBT organizations, ignore the legal assessment that this bill may not even provide adequate protections for gays, lesbians and bisexuals, and ignore the fact that this vote might make it more difficult to persuade members of Congress to support a fully inclusive bill in the future," he said in a release. "We are also disappointed that House leadership forced many members of its own caucus to choose between voting for a bill not supported by most in the LGBT community, or voting against a civil rights bill. This entire process has been painful, divisive and unnecessary. And worst of all, we went through all of this on behalf of a bill that the president has already said he would veto.

"We are relieved this episode is behind us, and starting right now we are going to pick up where we were six weeks ago—namely, working to pass into law in 2009 the ENDA our entire community wants and deserves," Foreman added.

Before that can happen, the Senate would have to approve it first. That could happen soon, according to various reports, as Senator Edward Kennedy has said he will "move swiftly" to introduce a similar measure. Pundits believe it has a good chance of passing, especially if it is worded correctly, early next year.

Should it escape President Bush's veto pen, the bill would make it illegal for an employer "to fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise discriminate against any individual with respect to the compensation, terms, conditions or privileges of employment of the individual, because of such individual's actual or perceived sexual orientation."

Currently, only 19 states, Washington, D.C. and a smattering of cities have laws barring such discrimination—federal law only bars discrimination based on race, religion, ethnicity, sex, age, disability and pregnancy.

