



Gay Rights Group Supports Job Bias Ban

By ANDREW MIGA, Associated Press Writer
Tuesday, November 6, 2007

A leading gay rights group changed course Tuesday to support a job discrimination bill even though it does not include transgender workers.

The Human Rights Campaign's decision to back the measure to prohibit workplace bias against gays, lesbians and bisexuals provides a boost to bill supporters as a House vote nears. The group had been pushing for transgender worker protections.

The organization's president, Joe Solmonese, said passage of the bill — the first federal workplace protection for gays, lesbians and bisexuals — could help pave the way for legislation that covers transgender workers.

"Sometimes with these sorts of complex and weighty legislative fights, the best way to move towards the ultimate piece of legislation you are looking for is to do it by degree," Solmonese said.

The exclusion of gender identity in the bill has created divisions within the Democratic Party and among gay rights activists. Some say they should take advantage of the Democrats' numerical superiority in the House while others argue that the legislation should include the transgender community.

"It is very unfortunate that the House leadership is moving the first-ever gay civil rights bill to the floor and the vast majority of gay rights group oppose it," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Rep. Barney Frank, a leading gay rights champion in Congress, urged fellow gay rights advocates not to let their dispute doom the bill.

"The notion that you would kill a bill that would be an enormous advance because it wasn't perfect doesn't make political sense," said Frank, D-Mass., who has pledged to pursue additional legislation for transgender workers.

Transgender is an umbrella term that covers transsexuals, cross-dressers and others whose outward appearance doesn't match their gender at birth.

The Employment Non-Discrimination Act would make it illegal for employers to make decisions about hiring, firing, promoting or paying an employee based on sexual orientation. Churches and the military would be exempt.

The bill's original version included protections for transgender workers. But Democratic leaders settled on a stripped-down version after finding that including transgender workers in the bill would cause it to fail in the full House.

That move sparked a backlash among many gay rights activists and forced Democratic leaders to delay a vote on the bill.

The Human Rights Campaign had steered a middle course, saying while it opposed the stripped-down bill, it would not actively oppose the measure. But the group changed its mind this week

once it became clear the measure providing protections based on sexual orientation was headed for a House vote, Solmonese said.

"This is not only a step in the right direction," he said. "It's also historic civil rights legislation to protect gay and lesbian people."

Federal law bans job discrimination based on factors such as race, gender and religion.

Nineteen states and the District of Columbia have laws against sexual-orientation discrimination. However, only nine states specifically protect transgender people from discrimination: New Jersey, Minnesota, Rhode Island, New Mexico, California, Illinois, Maine, Hawaii, Washington. The District of Columbia also has a similar law.

By January, laws also will be in effect in Iowa, Vermont, Colorado and Oregon.