

VT Lags on LGBT Health Awareness

By Ric Kasini Kadour

The third Annual National LGBT Health Awareness Week will take place March 13-19, 2005. Across the country, groups in major cities will organize events and activities to raise public awareness of the unique health concerns of the LGBT community.

The awareness week is organized by the National Coalition for LGBT Health, a Washington, DC-based advocacy group.

"LGBT Health Awareness Week is a very visible way to promote a healthy lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community across the nation," said Donald Hitchcock, the Coalition's national field director.

"Years of stigma and prejudice impact both the health of the LGBT community and the ability of health care providers to improve the wellness of their patients," said Henia Handler, a Coalition co-chair.

The Coalition hopes to raise awareness of the unique health concerns and health disparities among the LGBT communities by providing community health centers, local organizations, and community representatives with tools to amplify the national campaign at the local level. The event's website offers fact sheets, posters, postcards, and advertisements which organizations and community organizations can use free of charge.

While a number of community organizations, including some in the Northeastern US, are offering events to celebrate LGBT Health Awareness Week, Vermont organizations are not among them.

In Boston, the GLBT Health Access Project is launching their newest media campaign and Fenway Community Health is offering workshops for lesbians, bisexual women and

transgender people on coming out to their doctor.

In New York City, the Bronx Lesbian and Gay Health Resource Consortium is presenting a series of programs which address heart disease, diabetes, GLBT youth, and tobacco use.

Other groups are offering forums on health issues ranging from hepatitis to nutrition, domestic violence to marriage to mental health.

In Washington, DC, the week coincides with a lobbying effort to provide a framework for the continued inclusion of LGBT issues as part of the national health policy dialogue.

At press time, no Vermont organizations were planning on participating in LGBT Health Awareness Week

"I have not heard of it," said Vermont CARES Director

of Prevention Peter Jacobsen., "That doesn't mean we won't [be participating]."

"We don't have anything specifically planned for that," said Lluvia Mulvaney-Stanak, Outright Vermont Co-Executive Director. "It's actually related to that fabulous HIV funding thing because we don't have a programming staff position anymore."

"While R.U.1.2? Community Center is not participating this year, it will likely participate next year," said Executive Director Christopher Kauffman.

SafeSpace is looking into whether or not they may plan an event.

While Vermont has been a leader on equality for the LGBT communities, it has fallen behind the rest of the country on

addressing health disparities and health promotion needs of sexual minorities. The Vermont Department of Health has no dedicated staff addressing the health needs of LGBT communities.

State organizing "is sort of the next frontier," said the Coalition's Hitchcock. ▼

For more information on National LGBT Health Awareness Week, see: www.lgbthealth.net.

Ric Kadour is a men's health activist who splits his time between Shoreham and Montreal.

VCU Dissolves

Burlington – According to a late-breaking press release, Vermonters for Civil Unions has ceased to exist.

According to VCU Chair Susan Murray, "For us to continue our organization would be misleading. Civil unions were a step forward, but we remain committed to full equality for same-sex couples."

Murray emphasized that the work of VCU volunteers is far from over. "We'll encourage our supporters to support the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force and the Vermont Fund for Families in every way they can. Both of these organizations are actively working for the right to marry for same-sex couples in Vermont."

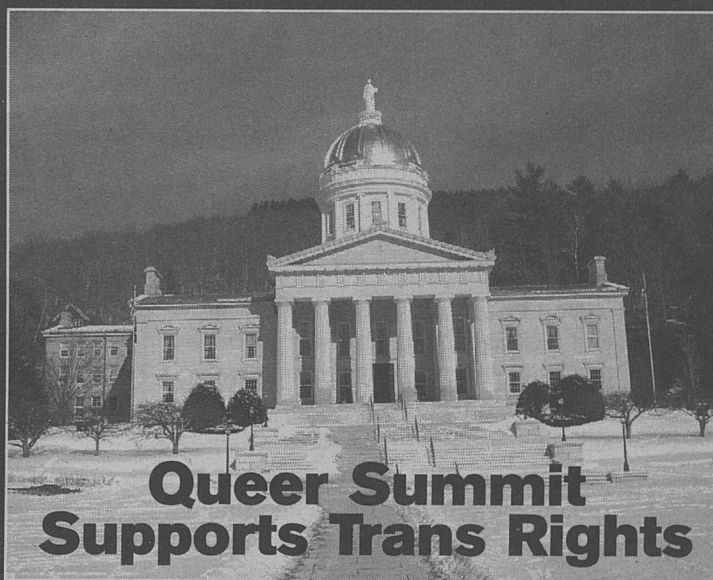
VCU, incorporated in 2000, was a political action committee supporting candidates who supported the civil union law. ▼

Montpelier – Full equality for transgender Vermonters is the top legislative priority for LGBT community activists in Vermont this year.

Representatives of Equality Vermont, the R.U.1.2? Queer Community Center, and LGBT activists from across the state are rallying behind a bill to be introduced by state Rep. Bill Lippert (D-Hinesburg). It would outlaw discrimination on the basis of gender identity or expression.

As of press time the bill had not yet been introduced, raising concerns that there would not be time to take testimony or build support before "crossover," the mid-to-late March date on which bills cross between the House and the Senate.

Rep. Lippert was still seeking cosponsors for his bill, which, if passed, would add "gender identity and expression" to the list of protected classes in Vermont law. Lippert says he is unsure how the bill will play out in the current legislative session or whether it would be supported by Governor Jim Douglas (R). "We're still feeling our way to get a sense of what the timing is and what the best strategy is," he said. "I think it is important to recognize that the bill is also an educational tool."



Vermont law already prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Virginia Renfrew, a representative of the statewide gay advocacy group Equality Vermont, said passage of the gender identity bill is important. "Transgender Vermonters can be discriminated against, and Equality Vermont truly believes that all Vermonters should be free of discrimination," she told OITM.

Christopher Kaufman, executive director of the

Burlington-based R.U.1.2? Queer Community Center, agreed with Renfrew. "It is unfortunate that gender identity and expression has never been covered before in many of Vermont's laws, although it is in the hate crimes law," he said.

To rally support for the trans-inclusive anti-discrimination bill, the R.U.1.2? Queer Community Center hosted a Queer Summit on January 29 at the State House in Montpelier. Nearly 50 people attended the all-day meeting facilitated by Lisa Mottet, a repre-

sentative of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), and Mara Keisling, executive director of the Washington, DC-based National Center for Transgender Equality.

According to Mottet, five states (California, Illinois, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Rhode Island) and approximately 75 cities and counties outlaw discrimination on the basis of gender identity and/or expression. The NGLTF also reports that only 27 percent of Americans live in jurisdictions that protect transgender residents compared to the 47 percent of Americans living in jurisdictions prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

For her part, Keisling emphasized the importance of lobbying legislators to support the bill. "Don't make the mistake of thinking all Democrats are good and all Republicans are bad," she said. "You'll have many allies in the statehouse." ▼

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