

## Groups Urge Gender Bill Testimony

**M**ontpelier – In mid-March a collection of LGBT groups and allies, expressing concern that the Gender Identity Bill was going nowhere fast, sent a collective letter urging House Judiciary Chairman Bill Lippert (D-Hinesburg) to hear testimony before the end of the month.

Lippert had delayed introducing the bill until eight weeks into the session while searching for additional sponsors that would show tripartisan support. It was filed with the Legislative Council just before the legislature took its weeklong Town Meeting break.

The bill, H.478, proposes to clarify Vermont's anti-discrimination statutes by adding "gender identity and expression" to the list of cat-

egories for which it is illegal to discriminate in employment, housing, public accommodation, banking, and insurance. It was introduced with 25 co-sponsors, including representatives from all sections of the state and all three major parties.

The groups urging the House Judiciary Committee to take testimony on the bill included, at press time, the VT Network Against Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault, VT Cares, the National Organization for Women, Mountain Pride Media, Spectrum Youth & Family Services, the Barony of All Vermont, and TransAction.

TransAction is an ad hoc committee of individuals and representatives from a wide range of organizations committed to the inclu-

sion of gender identity and expression in Vermont's non-discrimination laws. The organizations involved in TransAction include Equality Vermont, Safe Space, R.U.1.2? Queer Community Center, UVM's LGBTQA Services and Free to Be student organization, Outright Vermont, and the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force.

"The bill has a good chance of passing because it's the right thing to do," said Sherry Corbin, acting as a spokeswoman for TransAction. Corbin is also the director of the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force.

Asked about Rep. Lippert's characterization of H.478 as 'educational,' Corbin said the designation should not be interpreted as 'will not

pass this session.' "Does the state of Vermont need to be educated about this issue? Without a doubt. Does the lesbian and gay community need to be educated? Absolutely. Transgender people are part of our community, and when one part is discriminated against, we all need to take action."

Corbin suggested that the various constituencies identified with the "alphabet soup" (L-G-B-and-T) have not in the past worked well together. "Work on this bill is a huge step in our communities coming together," Corbin said.

Past efforts to get gender identity explicitly included in Vermont's non-discrimination clauses have foundered. A 2003 Lippert-introduced bill never received attention from the House Judiciary Committee, then chaired by Rep. Peg Flory (R-Pittsford). Flory, now the House minority leader, was asked to

sign onto the current bill as a cosponsor, but declined.

A previous attempt was driven primarily by the personal lobbying of Elizabeth Campbell, a CPA from Rutland and a transwoman. Campbell said later that she agreed to let go of the bill so as not to complicate an anticipated legislative struggle over same-sex marriage.

### Justices Retained

In other legislative news, the House and Senate met in joint session last month to vote by secret ballot on whether to retain the state's current Supreme Court justices, three of whom ruled on *Baker v. State*, directing the legislature to extend all the rights of marriage to same-sex couples. Following the recommendation of the joint Judiciary Retention Committee, chaired by Rep. Lippert, all three were retained. ▼

## Windham County Seeks LGBT Activists

**Brattleboro** – Thanks in large part to a \$10,000 grant from the Unity Project, Windham County may see an upsurge in organized LGBT activity. Craig Cullinane was hired by the AIDS Project of Southern Vermont to get the conference going.

So far, the plan is to hold the conference on May 14. Cullinane

expects 20-25 participants. Location is still to be decided. The entertainment/inspiration/learning facilitator will be Jeff Bercuvitz, known to many Vermont LGBT organizations from his work with Queer Summit attendees last year.

Glenn Johnson of T.H.E. Men's Project of the APSV said he wrote the grant with the aim of giving

something back to a community that has supported the AIDS project over the years. "We realized there was no other project that was able to apply for this program money, and there's a real need to get more grassroots organizing going."

"Rural areas such as Windham County offer a myriad of

challenges to a strong LGBT community," Cullinane wrote in an email, "including isolation, discrimination, lack of public visibility and acceptance, and homophobia and general silencing of LGBT issues. No LGBT movement in this region has been consistently successful in creating community space, functional and sustainable organizational capacity, or common goals and objectives across identity boundaries."

It is Cullinane's intention to get proportional representation from all segments of the community. Three activists will be recruited from the attendees to go to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's "Creating Change" conference next fall.

For conference information unavailable at press time, go to [gbltconference@yahoo.com](mailto:gbltconference@yahoo.com), or call 802-579-5056. ▼

## Burlington Protects Trans Students

**Ed.'s note:** This press release came in just before deadline.

In a unanimous vote in late March,

the Burlington School Board voted to amend its student harassment policy to include gender identity and expression. The new language has added

"gender identity and expression" to the list of protected characteristics and was motivated by the need to ensure that all students are able to


learn in a safe and supportive environment.

The change in the harassment policy was initiated last summer after the board began to review its existing policy. Several Board members felt that the existing policy

did not provide adequate protection to LGBT students and wanted to include gender identity and expression as part of the District's student harassment policy. A 2001 National School Climate Study found that 89 percent of transgender youth – youth whose gender identity and expression does not conform to the identity or expression traditionally associated with their biological sex – have faced harassment in school, and nearly one third of those students have suffered physical assault.

School Commissioner Christopher Haessly, a primary sponsor of the change, noted, "Burlington is the first school district in Vermont to include gender identity and expression as part of its student harassment policy, and is one of only a handful of districts across the country to extend protection to transgender students. All students deserve to learn in a safe and supportive environment, and this policy is another step toward that goal."

The district's policy had already extended protection to students and staff regarding sexual orientation; this change will extend protections against defamation and discrimination to transgender students. A similar change is pending with district's employee harassment policy. ▼



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