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H.247 Prohibiting Discrimination Debated

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In a historic first, a public hearing was held by the Judiciary Committee of the Vermont House of Representatives on H.247, a bill that would add the term "affectional or sexual orientation" to the list of prohibited discrimination. This was the first time that the issue of equal rights for gay men and lesbians has been openly discussed within the legislature.

The hearing, held on the evening of March 10, was attended by approximately 250 people. It was originally scheduled to be held in room 11, one of the larger hearing rooms in the Statehouse, but had to be moved to the well of the House when it became obvious that everyone could not fit.

The format for the hearing was set by Rep. Betty Nuovo, Chairperson of the Judiciary Committee. Each person who wanted to speak was allowed two minutes. Speakers had to make note on the sign-up

sheet whether they would be speaking in favor of or against H. 247. The order of speaking then alternated between pro and con speakers.

The hearing lasted for three hours as approximately 60 people testified on the bill. Pro-247 speakers' comments centered around personal experiences of discrimination and harassment. These speakers included those who identified themselves openly as lesbians and gay men as well as supporters, friends, parents and co-workers. Several anonymous statements were read which were sent by people who felt they could not speak out publicly for fear of the very discrimination which this bill addresses.

Anti-247 speakers, in general, argued against the bill based on often-quoted biblical passages. Committee members were warned that a vote in favor of this bill would condemn them to Hell. Lesbians and

gay men were described with words such as depraved, degenerate, filthy, unnatural and disgusting. Many of the anti speakers were from fundamentalist churches or right-wing organizations such as the Eagle Forum and Concerned Women of America.

Carrie Coy, one of those in attendance, said "It was very empowering for me to hear the very worst, the most damning arguments that people could offer, and to realize how shallow they are."

The Judiciary Committee has delayed consideration of H.247 until they have the opportunity to schedule a session of in-depth testimony from various expert witnesses.

Rep. Micque Glitman, the bill's prime sponsor and a member of the Judiciary Committee, told OITM that "the bill is still very much alive this session. People need to keep calling their legislators to make sure it passes."

VT House Passes HIV-3 Anti-Discrimination Bill

The Vermont House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed legislation to limit the use of blood testing for antibodies to the human immunosuppressive virus (HIV) and to prevent discrimination against those who test positive.

House Bill 239 passed on March 13th by a voice vote with only one dissenting vote heard. It would prohibit employers, landlords, educational institutions and health care providers from requiring the blood test or discriminating against those who have tested positive.

As originally written, the bill would have prevented life and health insurance companies from requiring the test as a condition of insurability, but that clause was removed by the House Health and Welfare Committee after intense lobbying by the politically powerful insurance industry.

Representative Ben Truman (D-Burlington), a member of the Health and Welfare Committee who pressed hard for the bill's passage said he was "... pleased that the House passed these important restrictions on blood testing and discrimination. Unfortunately, the insurance companies' unwillingness to compromise on testing means that one of the most glaring

examples of misuse of the test isn't covered. Hopefully we'll be able to look at this issue again next session and come up with appropriate restrictions on insurance testing."

H.239 was introduced by Representative Micque Glitman (D-Burlington) and 37 co-sponsors.

Supporters of the legislation are optimistic about the bill's passage in the Senate.

The bill attracted major public attention when it was revealed that National Life of Vermont had begun antibody testing for large life insurance policies. The Health and Welfare Committee conducted several days of hearings centered on the insurance questions, as representatives from state government agencies, insurance companies, medical authorities and community advocates testified in front of the committee.

Members of the Health and Welfare Committee, the Insurance Commissioner's office, insurance companies and civil rights advocates are negotiating at newspaper deadline time in an attempt to develop legislation which would set minimal confidentiality standards for insurance companies using the antibody test.

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