

Rhode Island Defeats Civil Rights Again

William Fitzpatrick

The legislative battle is over for this year, but the fight will continue. On Tuesday, June 29, 1993, the Rhode Island House of Representatives killed legislation that would have extended civil rights protection to gays, lesbians and bisexuals in the areas of employment, housing, credit and public accommodations. The end did not come easy nor quietly. On May 19, the Rhode Island Senate approved the Sexual Orientation/AntiDiscrimination Act by a 30 to 17 vote. This was a tremendous victory as similar acts have passed in the past (by slim margins) by one side of the legislature, never by both in concurrence.

That legislation was referred to the House Committee on Judiciary. A hearing was scheduled and a record 68 people testified for and against the legislation in a six hour standing room only session. On June 23rd, that committee rejected the Senate bill on a 9-7 vote. A similar House bill was also rejected by the committee.

Under new rules adopted by the Rhode Island House this legislative session, a Representative whose bill is rejected in committee has the right to ask that the full House override the committee recommendation. Rep. Francis Gaschen (D), sponsor of the House bill did that. The motion to override failed on a 58-39 vote. The gallery in the House of Representatives, packed with supporters of the legislation, erupted into a chorus of jeers and a chant of "equal rights, simple justice." Other demonstrators in the rotunda of the State House, outside the House chamber, picked up the chant. Ordered by the Speaker of the House to end the demonstration but unwilling to do so, the demonstrators were cleared from the chamber by the State Police. One protester was arrested. The angry, boisterous and loud demonstration by at least 300 people continued for over four hours, often interrupting the business of the House, which finally adjourned when it found that it could not concentrate on the work at hand; the state budget.

Rhode Island's effort to enact civil rights legislation has been a sad series of missteps compared with the strides that have been made in other states. This is the ninth consecutive year that a Sexual Orientation/Anti-Discrimination bill has been defeated. ▼

(State Senator William P. Fitzpatrick is a Democrat who represents District 11 in the city of Cranston, Rhode Island. The first openly homosexual member of the Rhode Island General Assembly, he is a member of the Senate Committee on Judiciary, the Senate Committee on Health, Education and Welfare, and is Vice Chair of the General Assembly's Joint Committee on Environment and Energy.)

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Health Resource Organizations

AIDS HOTLINES:

Vermont 1-800-882-2437
New Hampshire 1-800-752-2437
New York State 1-800-541-2437
Massachusetts 1-617-522-4090
Maine 1-800-851-2437
National 1-800-342-2437
Canadian 1-613-563-2437

AIDS Community Awareness Project (ACAP)

PO Box 608
St. Johnsbury VT 05819
(802) 748-1149

AIDS Community Resource Network (ACoRN)

PO Box 2057
Lebanon NH 03766
(603) 448-2220

Bennington Area AIDS Project

PO Box 1066
Bennington VT 05201
(802) 442-4481 or 1-800-845-2437

Brattleboro AIDS Project

PO Box 1486
Brattleboro VT 05302
(802) 254-4444 (Helpline)
(802) 254-8263 (Office)

Franklin-Grand Isle AIDS Task Force

P. O. Box 241, St. Albans VT 05478
(800) 524-7742 • (802) 638-7834

Gay/Lesbian Alcoholics Anonymous

GLAA, P.O. Box 5653
Burlington, VT 05402

Lesbian Cancer Support Group

(802) 660-8386

North Star (Holistic Health Care)

RR2 Box 3255
Morrisville VT 05661 • (802) 888-2858

Vermont AIDS Council

PO Box 275
Montpelier VT 05601 • (802) 229-2557

Vermont C.A.R.E.S.

(Committee for AIDS Resources, Education, and Services)
PO Box 5248
30 Elmwood Avenue
Burlington VT 05401
(802) 863-2437 (Burlington)
1-800-649-2437 (Rutland and Washington County support groups)

Vermont Department of Health

1-800-882-2437 (AIDS Hotline) or
(802) 863-7245 (AIDS Program office)

VT PWA Coalition

PO Box 1055 • Brattleboro, VT 05302
1-800-698-8792 or (802) 222-5123

Vermont Women's Health Center

336 North Avenue
Burlington VT 05401 • (802) 863-1386