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VERMONT'S NEWSPAPER FOR LESBIANS, GAY MEN, AND BISEXUALS

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A Progressive & Responsive Step Forward: Vermont becomes first state to extend benefits

Kip Roberson

MONTPELIER -- "Effective August 1, 1994, medical and dental benefits coverage for dependents of state employees shall be extended to domestic partners and the children of domestic partners..." These words begin the letter from the Vermont Department of Personnel that makes Vermont the first state in the nation to extend health care benefits to the domestic partners of its employees.


"Under an agreement between the state employees' labor union and the state, both unmarried heterosexual and homosexual partners are eligible for health and dental benefits now offered to spouses", said Personnel Commissioner Thomas Torti. While this new policy is a definite step toward an all-encompassing fairness, a fairness that affords everyone equal protection under the law, it was not formulated through an easy process. The agreement was reached as the result of a grievance filed by a state employee after the Department of Personnel ruled last year that same-sex partners would not be eligible for coverage. Had the agreement not been reached, a lawsuit would likely have ensued because the State Labor Relations Act includes a clause prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation.

While Governor Howard Dean and his administration were not opposed to providing coverage for the partners and children of gay and lesbian employees, they also wanted to ensure that unmarried heterosexuals be given coverage. Conversely, some members of the state employees' union have been much less supportive, to the extent that at least one member has removed his/her name from the union rolls. Union Director Thomas Whitney has received some angry letters as

a result of the change but said that "positive calls outweigh negative ones".

According to statistics compiled by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Vermont joins fifty-seven private sector companies, seventeen non-profit organizations, twenty-seven educational institutions, three labor organizations, and thirty-five municipalities in providing domestic partner benefits. Of these numbers, at least five are located in Vermont. They include Ben & Jerry's, Gardener's Supply, the City of Burlington, Middlebury College, and UVM. The list of criteria to meet for enrollment is short, at only six requirements. To qualify, an employee and his or her partner must sign an affidavit that says they are eighteen years of age or older and unmarried and that they are "each other's sole domestic partner having been in an exclusive and enduring domestic relationship, while sharing a residence, for not less than six consecutive months prior to submission of (an) enrollment application." Although domestic partner benefits are offered to employees as an attempt to provide basic civil rights for all, the United States government has not kept up with this trend. "If a domestic partner, or his/her child(ren),

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**VERMONT
GAY GAMES IV
VOLLEYBALL**

**Vermont Plays the Gay Games:
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Whoomp, There It Is! Senator Jeffords co-sponsors national non-discrimination bill

Paul Olsen

BURLINGTON/WASHINGTON, D.C.
-- On June 23, 1994, Republican Senator James Jeffords became an original co-sponsor of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act of 1994 (ENDA). When passed, ENDA would prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation nationwide. In light of the upcoming election for the U.S. Senate, Jeffords' co-sponsorship creates one issue that does not significantly separate him from either of his potential Democratic opponents.

Cynics might question the timing of Jeffords' signing onto this bill. While federal bills prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation have been introduced since as early as 1975 (Jeffords has served since 1974), Vermont's self-proclaimed "maverick" in Washington has resisted sponsorship until now. His past failure to sponsor national gay rights legislation, in part, explains his National Gay & Lesbian Task Force grade of 78% in the 103rd Congress. Others might argue that the timing of Jeffords' co-sponsorship might actually hurt him especially among Vermont's Religious Right who include in their agenda the denial of civil rights to lesbian and gay Americans.

Jeffords will face either Doug Costle or Jan Backus, who are both seeking the Democratic nomination in the September 13 primary. Attorney Doug Costle most recently served as Dean of the Vermont Law School. Jan Backus

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