

Out in the Mountains

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The Time is Now: Civil Rights for All Vermonters

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Keith Goslant
Co-Liaison to the Governor, Vermont
Coalition of Lesbians and Gay Men

As Co-Liaison, the question I'm asked most frequently must be, "So, where's the bill?" The question refers to the bill prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, known in the past as H-247, S-278, and H-211. The most recent incarnations are H-162 and S-131. This bill would extend the nondiscrimination clauses of 15 Vermont statutes to protect everyone regardless of their sexual orientation. The bill would add the words "sexual orientation" to the existing categories (race, age, sex, religion, marital status, national origin, and handicap) that under Vermont law cannot be the basis of discrimination in jobs, housing, public accommodations, education, credit and insurance.

In January 1991 the bill, which was first drafted and introduced in 1986, was re-introduced into both the House (H-162) and Senate (S-131). In the House our lead sponsor is Representative Vi Luginbuhl of South Burlington, one of a handful of Republican supporters. In the Senate the lead sponsor is Senator David Wolk of Rutland. Senator Wolk eloquently reported the Hate Crime bill to the full Senate during the last legislative session. Both versions of the bill are identical in language and both are assigned to the Judiciary Committees in each chamber. Neither version contains amendments to the family law/child custody statutes, although both Co-Liaisons included it in their draft versions. The sponsors of the bill did not feel they could get broad support if "family" issues were included. If protection for lesbian, gay and bisexual parents is to be added, it will have to be done in committee and then approved by the full

chamber. During the first year of this biennium ('91-'92) we tried a low key approach; letting the bill advance without extensive media attention or pressure on individual committees. At times it seemed this strategy would work to our advantage; however, it made it difficult to keep members of our community informed on action. We questioned how quiet we could be and still be visible and effective. We have gained support but still there has been no committee vote in either chamber. As we prepare for the second year of this session we are in a position to re-evaluate this strategy.

What to do now:

Invite your legislators to meet with you and a small group (6-8) of fellow constituents and share with them why this bill is needed and important. Some legislators have said they do not think they have lesbian, gay or bisexual constituents.

Call and/or write your legislators and ask them to support this important civil rights legislation. If you feel you cannot sign your name let your legislator know why; share your fear with them. (A list of legislators, organized by town/county is included in the insert of this issue along with a form to use if you don't have time to write a letter.)

Ask your friends, co-workers and family to call or write their legislators. Every letter or call helps a lot.

Ask your church, labor, social, professional or charitable group to join the Vermonters who already support full and equal civil rights for all Vermonters: lesbian, gay, bisexual or straight.

Carefully watch the progress of H-162 and S-131. If a public hearing is held, consider testifying. Personal accounts of discrimination are our strongest and most

effective advocacy, even when given anonymously. A supportive audience is also needed-bring a friend.

Become part of the phone network to distribute information about the bill. You can add your name to the list by calling either Co-Liaison or writing to the Coalition.

Organize a letter writing party with your friends. It is easier and more fun when done in a group.

If you have any questions about the bill or want to be more actively involved, please contact either Holly Perdue or me, or write the Coalition.

As lesbians, gay men and bisexuals we have made lasting contributions to the diversity, creativity and unique quality that is Vermont. It is time for our contributions to be acknowledged and our voices heard. The time for our full civil rights is now!

Co-Liaisons: Holly Perdue, 229-0109 & Keith Goslant, 454-8552
Vermont Coalition of Lesbians and Gay Men, PO Box 1125, Montpelier, VT 05602 ▼

