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# Out in the Mountains

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## Burlington City Council Addresses Domestic Partner Benefits

Cleland Selby

The Burlington City Council is currently considering a proposed addition to the city employees' benefits package for unmarried domestic partners. The estimated additional cost is \$35,000 out of a total health care cost of \$2.2 million (about 2%). According to Maurice Mahoney, chair of the Personnel Committee, this additional cost would not be an issue if the estimated seventeen additional covered families been married in a traditional marriage contract.

The issue of granting benefits for domestic partners first surfaced in the City of Burlington in 1990 when some city employees went to Mayor Peter Clavelle requesting that he and the City Council address the issue. In his speech at that year's Pride Parade in June, Mayor Clavelle publicly announced his intention to address the issue. It wasn't until late 1991 that the Personnel Committee received a formal request from the mayor to consider the issue. According to Mahoney at that time the Committee had several other issues to "wrap up first" including the Burlington Electric department merger and the management study of the fire department.

In March of 1992 Mahoney requested that city resource Director Linda Gibson survey city employees. "I wanted city employees to be included from the beginning." A two page survey was distributed and returned to Gibson in April. Seventeen of the 610 city employees responded at that time that they would take

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## Gay and Lesbian Health Care Benefits: The Struggle for Domestic Partner Coverage at The University of Vermont

Beth Mintz

For two years now, gay and lesbian staff and faculty at the University of Vermont (UVM) have been fighting for health care benefits for their partners. While the University provides health care coverage to the spouses of married employees, comparable benefits have been denied to gay men and lesbians even though UVM's nondiscrimination policy guarantees equal rights and equal treatment: "The University of Vermont does not discriminate on the basis of ...sexual orientation...in access to, or treatment in...its programs and activities." Moreover, an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Statement interpreting UVM's nondiscrimination policy states that equal access applies to all employment practices, including benefits. Nevertheless, the UVM administration's refusal to grant benefits stands, even in the face of a unanimous finding of discrimination by the Faculty Grievance Committee in a formal hearing.

Two things stand out in this case. First, this is an issue of equal pay for equal work. Since gay men and lesbians do not get health care coverage for their partners, they earn significantly less in total compensation than their married co-workers. This simply is not fair. More important perhaps, by denying our partners the same benefits as other employees, the University fails to recognize that we have relationships, that we can have families, and that we have adult responsibilities. This policy, therefore, makes us invisible and treats us in that way.

This is why the issue is so important. The move for health care coverage for gay male and lesbian partners on campus echoes events occurring throughout the country. A series of prominent companies including Levi-Strauss, Lotus, and Ben & Jerry's are now providing complete benefit packages to long-term partners of gay men and lesbians. And while the City of Burlington is struggling to implement fair and equitable health care coverage by including domestic partners, Cambridge, MA, Berkley, Seattle, and others have already done so. Moreover, legal decisions are starting to affirm our rights. In ruling that lesbian and gay male employees have a legal right to sue for health insurance, a New York State court recently found that failure to provide benefits can constitute discrimination on the basis of sexual orienta-

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## Partnership Benefits at Other Universities

### University of Iowa

The University of Iowa board of regent approved extension of health insurance to partners of gay, lesbian and unmarried heterosexual employees by a 6-2 vote on October 21. The policy takes effect January 1, 1993.

### Harvard University

A faculty/staff committee has been appointed by Harvard University President Neil Rudenstine to study the issue of domestic partner benefits (primarily health care) for the University community. Harvard's Union of Clerical and Technical workers has included domestic partnership benefits in its bargaining agenda since early last spring.