

RANDOLPH -- The Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights did not expect this to be a very busy year for our community in Montpelier, but 1995 proved to be an action-packed legislative session. Here is a brief overview of the issues that were of concern to our community, the Coalition's response to date and our plans for the future. If you would like further information or would like to work with the Public Policy Committee, please call Susan Aranoff at (802)728-4121 or Keith Goslant at (802)454-8552. The Public Policy Committee meets in Montpelier; meetings are open to all VCLGR members and allies.

ADOPTION VCLGR has participated actively in the adoption reform process since 1993. Throughout the summer and fall of 1994, Coalition members attended and monitored the hearings and working sessions of the legislature's adoption reform study committee. The adoption bill, as introduced, would have upheld existing state law as it pertains to same-sex second parent adoptions. The Vermont Supreme Court has ruled that a child may be adopted by the same-sex partner of her or his parent if a judge finds the adoption to be in the child's best interest.

In late February, an amendment prohibiting second parent adoptions for same-sex couples was added to the adoption reform bill by the Senate Health and Welfare Committee. The adoption bill then moved to the Senate Judiciary Committee which held a public hearing on the bill in March. Over 60 people testified at the public hearing; 37 testified against the amendment, 5 in favor and 19 testified regarding other aspects of the bill. Same-sex parents, children raised by same-sex parents, the Vermont Children's Forum, and the Human Rights Commission were among those who testified in favor of maintaining existing state law as it relates to the best interest of children and second parent adoptions.

After the public hearing, the Senate Judiciary Committee, under the leadership of Susan Sweetser (R-Chittenden), voted to not concur with the amendment. However, the Committee has not yet created its own definition of who may adopt. The Senate Judiciary Committee will be continuing to work on the adoption reform bill throughout the summer and may hold another public hearing; if it does, we will act.

With an eye toward passage by the Senate of a bill that would

allow for same-sex second parent adoptions, VCLGR is beginning to educate all senators about the mental health of children raised by lesbians and gay men.

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION The Human Rights Commission is the only arm of our State Government dedicated exclusively to the enforcement of our anti-discrimination laws. These laws are borne out of the sad truth that many in our society hold and act upon certain irrational prejudices against those who are different from them in one way or another. Anti-discrimination laws are need-based; they are not passed unless a clear need for them has been established. Such necessity was shown for the passage by the Vermont Legislature of the 1992 Civil Rights Act which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Vermont is not yet a discrimination-free state. And until it is, we need the Human Rights Commission to continue its vital mission unfettered by mean-spirited political attacks. The Human Rights Commission, Vermont's only bastion of civil rights enforcement, is under attack. The HRC is the target of a few people who are unhappy with their personal experience with the HRC and cannot see beyond their personal experience in order to acknowledge the need for strong civil rights enforcement in Vermont.

Three bills were introduced this session designed to eliminate or curtail the HRC. The Coalition testified at numerous hearings, sent out alerts and is continuing to work to support the HRC.

BALLOT INITIATIVES Sen. Jeb Spaulding (D-Washington) has introduced Ballot Initiative legislation every year that he has been in the Senate. In a nutshell, ballot initiatives allow for laws to be created directly by a majority of voters. While seemingly neutral on the surface, ballot initiatives have historically been used to oppress and restrict the rights of unpopular minorities. In recent years, ballot initiatives targeted against the civil rights of lesbians and gay men have cost our community hundreds of thousands of dollars to oppose and have subjected us to hate, verbal, and physical violence. When we 'win' we only end up exactly where we started before we were attacked. We here in Vermont will be particularly vulnerable to attack by ballot initiatives because of our small voter base. It would take a relatively small infusion of money from the national right-wing groups that sponsor anti-gay ballot initiatives to turn the tide against us here in Vermont. In light of these and other concerns, the Coalition has decided to officially oppose amending Vermont's Constitution to allow ballot initiatives.

The public policy arm of the Coalition has been active in other arenas as well. For instance, as a direct result of our contacts, the Department of Education changed its model 'anti-harassment in education policy' so that minors experiencing harassment on account of their actual or perceived sexual orientation do not have to be 'outed' to their parents against their will.

Other bills that VCLGR has been monitoring and is prepared to offer testimony on or activate support for or opposition to include the following:

- **Death with Dignity Bill** -- This legislation is modeled on the recently passed Oregon law allowing physician-assisted euthanasia.
- **Medical Information Confidentiality Act** -- This bill gives medical consumers control over what information is provided and to whom.
- **Victim's Bill of Rights** -- This legislation sets out a clear set of rights to be afforded to all crime victims in Vermont.
- **Appropriations Bill** -- This legislation is being monitored to ensure the soundness of HIV-related appropriations.

If you would like further information about any of the bills covered in this summary, or information on action steps you can take, please contact Susan or Keith. If you are aware of any other bills, policies, or regulations of concern to g/l/b/t Vermonters, please let us know. And please, if you have any energy for these issues, join the Public Policy Committee. Together we can continue to create positive social change in Vermont.

If you need to contact the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights (VCLGR), you may write to PO Box 1125, Montpelier, VT 05602, or you may call (802) 365-9139 or (802) 482-3927.

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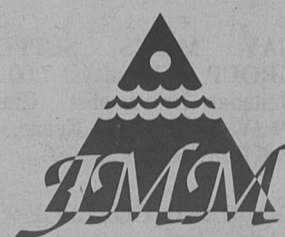
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