

# Weekly Events

## AA MEETINGS:

- BURLINGTON** — Sundays, 5 p.m., Christ Church Presbyterian, Redstone Campus, University of Vermont.  
 — Thursdays, 7 p.m., St. Paul's Cathedral, Cherry Street, Burlington. Call 802.658.4221.
- CONCORD (NH)** — Wednesdays, 7:30 p.m., First Congregational Church, North Main and Washington Streets.
- KEENE (NH)** — Saturdays, 7-8:30 p.m. Call 603.357.4300.
- MANCHESTER (NH)** — Sundays, 7:30 p.m., Unitarian Universalist Church, 669 Union Street.
- NASHUA (NH)** — Mondays, 7:30 p.m., Nashua Unitarian Church.

## COLLEGE GROUPS:

- ADIRONDACK COMMUNITY COLLEGE GL ASSOCIATION** — Wednesdays, 6:30 p.m., Mountaineer Room.
- CHAMPLAIN COLLEGE GLB SUPPORT GROUP** — Mondays, 4-5 p.m., Student Resource Center, Hauke Family Campus Center. Call 802.658.0800 x. 2605.
- GODDARD COLLEGE GLB ALLIANCE** — Sundays, 7 p.m.; weekly film series, 8 p.m. Call 802.454.8311, x.225.
- MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE GLB ALLIANCE** — Sundays, 8 p.m., May Belle Chellis House, Hillcrest Street. Call 802.388.3711 x. 3502.
- UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT GLB ALLIANCE** — Thursdays, 7 p.m., Billings B106. Call 802.863.7164.

## HIV/AIDS MEETINGS:

- BRATTLEBORO AREA AIDS PROJECT** — For PLWA, friends, and families. 4th Floor, 67 Main St., Brattleboro. Wednesdays, 12:30-1:30 p.m. Call Maryann at 802.254.8263.
- SUPPORT GROUP FOR HIV+/AIDS WOMEN** — Mondays, 3:30-5:30 p.m., Greenfield MA. Call 413.773.8888.
- VERMONT CARES** — Support group for gay/bi men living with HIV/AIDS, Mondays, 5:30-7 p.m. Call 802.863.2437.  
 Support group for heterosexual men and women living with HIV/AIDS, Thursdays, 1-2:30 p.m. Call 802.863.2437.  
 Support group for family and friends of people living with HIV/AIDS, Thursdays, 5-6:30 p.m. Call 802.863.8162.

**HUNTINGTON OPEN WOMEN'S LAND (HOWL)** — Sundays, 11 a.m.-2 p.m., a potluck brunch. Call 802.864.5595.

**KEENE GAY MEN'S SUPPORT GROUP** — Tuesdays. Unitarian Universalist Church, 69 Washington St., Keene, NH. Call Brian at 800.639.7903.

**MYRIAD NETWORK** — For g/l/b/t's in the Berkshires. Fridays, 7 p.m., First Congregational Church, Williamstown MA. Write Box 288, Williamstown MA 01267.

## NETWORK NORTH —

- Cheap Movie Nights, Tuesdays, 6:15 p.m. at Wilton Mall Food Court, Wilton NY.
- Coffee Nights, Wednesdays, 6:30 p.m. at Uncommon Grounds, Saratoga Springs NY.
- Coffee Mornings, Thursdays, 9:30 a.m. at Uncommon Grounds, Saratoga Springs NY.

**OUTRIGHT VERMONT** — GLB youth groups (under 23). Fridays, 7-9 p.m. Young men's group (under 22): Thursdays, 7-8:30 p.m. Call 802.865.9677.

## P-FLAG GROUPS:

**CENTRAL VERMONT** — 3rd Sundays, 1 p.m., 2nd Floor Chapel, Unitarian Universalist Church, Montpelier (use School Street entrance). Call Jan at 802.479.9246.

**SOCIAL ALTERNATIVES FOR MEN (SAM)** — Tuesdays, 7:30 p.m. Meeting and social at Hotel Coolidge, White River Junction at 9 p.m. Call 603.543.4136.

**STRAIGHT SPOUSES OF G/L/B PARTNERS** — Support group, every third Tuesday at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Northampton MA. Call Jane at 413.625.6033.

**WOMEN ONLY PICK-UP VOLLEYBALL** — Thursdays, 5-6:45 p.m., Mater Christi School, 100 Mansfield Ave, Burlington. Call Sue at 802.899.5049. ▼

## Legal Briefs:

# Sexual Orientation Discrimination in Housing and Public Accommodations

Like a small but growing number of freedom-minded states, Vermont prohibits discrimination against gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and heterosexuals in housing and public accommodations.

The housing discrimination law is broad. It prohibits not only the refusal to sell or rent to someone on the basis of his or her sexual orientation, but also discrimination in home financing, advertising regarding housing, and real estate practices. Landlords who rent apartments in buildings with three or fewer units, and who themselves or whose families live in the same building, are exempt from the law's provisions, as are certain religious organizations.

Some courts in other states have ruled that the Constitution requires an additional exemption for landlords who claim that their religious beliefs require them to refuse to rent to gays or lesbians, or to unmarried heterosexual couples. This exception threatens to swallow the nondiscrimination rule, as many homophobic landlords across the country are invoking the First Amendment's protection of freedom of religion as they turn away unmarried or gay or lesbian tenants. The Vermont Supreme Court hasn't ruled on this issue, so it's not clear whether the free religion defense would work in Vermont.

The public accommodations law applies to "any school, restaurant, store, establishment or other facility at which services, facilities, goods, privileges, advantages, benefits or accommodations are offered to the general public." The law prohibits any such public accommodation from refusing service to a patron on the basis of his or her sexual orientation. Although the statute does not carve out any exceptions to the general rule, we can expect that someone, sometime, will raise a First Amendment/religious freedom defense like the one discussed above.

If you think you may be or have been subjected to improper discrimination under one of these laws, you should make sure that the landlord or public accommodation cannot point to some legitimate, non-discriminatory factor to explain their actions. For instance, if you believe you were kicked out of a bar because you danced with your same-gender date, it certainly won't help your case if, immediately prior to being asked to leave, you jumped up on a table and sang loudly while you danced. If you are looking for an apartment, you should make sure your references are favorable and your rent payments are on time. (It's not an absolute requirement to a successful discrimination claim that your life history and conduct be beyond reproach, but it certainly doesn't hurt.)

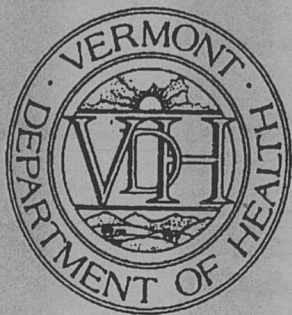
You can report claims of housing and public accommodation discrimination to the Vermont Human Rights Commission by calling 802.828.2480. The Commission will conduct an investigation and attempt to resolve your complaint informally to everyone's satisfaction. If the Commission finds reasonable grounds to believe that discrimination has occurred, it may pursue a civil action in court, on your behalf, and seek compensatory and punitive damages, as well as a civil penalty against the discriminating party. In the last three years, the Commission has received eleven complaints of housing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and fifteen complaints of public accommodation discrimination. Not all of those complaints led to a full investigation or determination.

You can also sue the discriminating party directly, regardless of whether you file a complaint with the Human Rights Commission and regardless of whether the Human Rights Commission elects to pursue a claim on your behalf. You are entitled to sue for any damage or losses you suffered as a result of the discrimination, punitive damages (to punish the discriminating party), and attorney's fees and costs. You can also ask the court to order the guilty party to cease discriminating practices.

A private attorney can help you evaluate whether it would make sense for you to pursue a lawsuit, and will likely offer to represent you on a contingent-fee basis if he or she believes that your case is sufficiently strong. (That means that you would not be required to pay the attorney on an hourly basis but, rather, would only be responsible for any out-of-pocket costs incurred by the attorney plus a specified portion of any amount the attorney was able to recover on your behalf.) You should be able to find an attorney who is willing to offer a free initial consultation.

*Susan Murray and Beth Robinson are attorneys at Langrock Sperry & Wool in Middlebury, Vermont whose practices include employment issues, family matters, estate planning, personal injury and worker's compensation cases, and general civil litigation. This column features timely information about legal issues of interest to our community. We hope to provide information about important laws and court cases that may affect our rights, as well as practical nuts and bolts advice for protecting ourselves and our families. If you'd like to see us cover a particular topic, please feel free to write OITM or call us at 388-6356. ▼*

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