

Remarkable Gains on Transgender Issues Set Stage for Hopeful Massachusetts Victory

The past six months have brought unprecedented victories for the transgender community in many parts of the country, in what is hopefully setting the stage for further advances throughout the rest of 2011.

In April, the Hawaii state legislature voted to prohibit discrimination in employment on the basis of perceived or actual gender identity. "Providing employment protections to transgender citizens in Hawaii is a victory for...equal treatment under the law for all residents of our great state," said Alan Spector, the co-chair of Equality Hawaii. Protections for transgender people were already ensured in Hawaii in the areas of housing and public accommodations. With April's vote, Hawaii became the 13th state to include employment protections as well. It was the first state to do so since 2006.

Nevada soon followed with three measures of its own for transgender people. The state Assembly gave final approval to the first law in May, which, like the Hawaii law, prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of gender identity and expression. It was sponsored by Assemblyman Paul Aizley (D-Las Vegas). The Assembly then approved a law protecting LGBT people against discrimination in public accommodations such as hotels and restaurants, as well as a law protecting LGBT people in housing and real property transactions, both of which were sponsored by Senator David Parks (D-Las Vegas). "Protecting our transgender citizens harms no one," said Sen. Parks.

On June 4, the Connecticut Senate voted 20-16 to pass a law prohibiting discrimination in employment, housing, credit, public accommodations and other areas based on gender identity and expression. "This bill is another step forward...for equal rights for all of Connecticut's citizens, and it's the right thing to do," Governor Malloy said in a statement. "It's difficult enough for people who are grappling with the issue of their gender identity, and discrimination against them has no place in our society. Connecticut has lead the way in other civil rights issues and I'm proud to be able to support and sign this bill." The punishment for not complying with the law would be up to five years in prison, a fine of up to \$5,000, or both. The state's district court ruled in 2008 that sex-based discrimination included gender identity, so the new law codifies this.

Less than a week later on June 8, Maine legislators voted against a bill that would have barred transgender people from filing discrimination against schools, businesses and public institutions that force them to use certain facilities.

"We're very pleased that the legislature rejected this attempt to insert discrimination into the Maine Human Rights Act by rolling back vital protections for transgender people that had existed for nearly six years," commented Jennifer Levi, director of the Transgender Rights Project at the Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders (GLAD).

Also on June 8, Portland, Oregon, became the third city in America to offer transgender-inclusive health care benefits for city employees. City commissioners voted unanimously to remove a trans-exclusion clause from their employee health coverage and implement a new inclusive policy. "To truly provide medically necessary benefits that meet the needs of the City's transgender employees, this recommendation adds coverage for the services required to complete gender transition," according to the website of Portland Mayor Sam Adams, in addition to providing coverage for all employees for prescriptions, office visits, and other benefits.

Autumn Sandeen recently highlighted these and additional successes in the San Diego LGBT Weekly. She notes that the federal government now protects transgender federal employees in its antidiscrimination policy, and that individual federal agencies have also been updating their policies. "The transgender community has pretty much

quietly, and off the radar, achieved significant progress with regards to basic civil rights this year," she concludes optimistically.

These significant gains all set a positive outlook for the rest of the year. In Massachusetts, hearings continue on a pending bill that would add transgender people to the list of groups for which discrimination is prohibited in areas such as housing, schooling, labor laws and hate crimes. A Transgender Equal Rights Lobby Day was held Thursday to encourage constituents to talk to legislators about the importance of protections for the trans community. "Hearing from constituents is very important to legislators when they are making the decision whether to support a bill or not," said Gunner Scott, executive director of the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition (MTPC). Organizations such as MTPC and MassEquality continue to advocate for transgender people in the state. Of note, MTPC has an ongoing multimedia campaign, called "I AM: Trans People Speak," that is aimed at raising awareness about the diverse communities of trans individuals, families and allies. We highly recommend it to you for viewing. To stay up-to-date with developments on the Massachusetts Transgender Equal Rights Bill, follow @PassMaTransBill on Twitter.

Because transgender people face some of the worst discrimination, this recent legislation is necessary to ensure equality. GLAAD applauds these victories and will continue monitoring media coverage of transgender-specific legislation and issues.

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) amplifies the voice of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community by empowering real people to share their stories, holding the media accountable for the words and images they present, and helping grassroots organizations communicate effectively. By ensuring that the stories of LGBT people are heard through the media, GLAAD promotes understanding, increases acceptance, and advances equality.
