

TRANS RIGHTS FIGHT

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Clarence Wood, chairman of the city of Chicago Commission on Human Relations, urged aldermen here to follow in New York City's footsteps by adding a gender identity amendment to the Chicago Human Rights Ordinance at an April 26 press conference.

"New York gave us an example we must quickly emulate in Chicago," Wood said.

On April 24, the New York City Council passed a bill 45-5 amending the city's Human Rights Law to protect people from discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression in employment, housing and public accommodations. Transgender activists, from the Transgender Law & Policy Institute (TLPI) and the New York Association of Gender Rights (NYAGRA) have been working since May 2001 to pass this bill.

Lorraine Sade Baskerville, an activist and the first transgendered person to be inducted into Chicago's Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame, said "Race and gender shape self-image. Human rights belong to every human being."

Chicago aldermen Bernie Hansen and Billy Ocasio introduced the amendment in September 2000. The amendment to the ordinance then went to Mayor Richard Daley's counsel to address the correct legal language. The Commission on Human Relations will set up meetings with aldermen to open the dialogue and gain support.

According to Chairman Wood, 20 aldermen feel comfortable to endorse the amendment.

In attendance at the press conference were U.S. Congressman Luis Gutierrez, D-4, U.S. Congresswoman Janice Schakowsky, D-9, and Cook County Commissioner Mike Quigley, D-10.

"This puts a human face to problems suffered by transgendered people. We have been collecting stories denied services because of gender stereotyping. We have 30 new stories of employment, housing and police misconduct," said Miranda Stevens-Miller, political director of It's Time, Illinois!, a political action and public advocacy group for the gender variant and transgender community.

According to "Discrimination 2002: 6th Report on Discrimination and Hate Crimes Against Gender Variant People" published by It's Time, Illinois! from January 2000 to December 2001, there have been 30 documented cases of discrimination against transgender individuals.

There have been 11 in employment; six in public accommodations; four in housing and credit; five civil-rights violations by police and state agencies; and four hate crimes.

Since 1995, there have 108 incidents of violence and other discriminatory acts against gender-variant men and women documented by the group.

"It is not easy. We have to remember what's right and keep fighting. People are not safe in their homes, jobs and restaurants. This is only the best place to live in the world if there is access to basic care," said Laura Rissover from the Human Relations Commission's Advisory Council on Gay and Lesbian Issues.

Similar to the New York City ordinance, the amendment would make clear that all gender-based discrimination-including, but not limited to, discrimination based on an individual's actual or perceived sex, and discrimination based on an individual's gender identity, appearance, behavior, or expression-constitutes a violation of the City's Human Rights Law.

At the press conference, State reps Sara Feigenholtz, D-12, and Larry McKeon, D-34 advocated for the passage of House Bill 101 by the Senate, which would amend the Illinois Human Rights Act to include sexual orientation and gender identity. House Bill 101 was passed one year ago. They also struggle to amend the Illinois Hate Crimes Statute and pass the Employment Discrimination Act (ENDA). The General Assembly sponsored the Gender Violence Act with the Illinois Commission on the Status of Women that would allow victims of violence to sue civilly for damages.

"This report is so involved and so telling. It is a road map to convince members in the General Assembly how important it is to stop the violence," said Feigenholtz.

McKeon said that when he tried to pass a 1995 bill that added sexual orientation to the employment discrimination act some members of the General Assembly commented to him "that they'd get sexual orientation included [in the bill] if it didn't include those people."

"We have to continue to fight bigotry, intolerance and hate driven by ignorance," he said.

Champaign and Urbana adopted gender-inclusive human-rights legislation to their city ordinances in the 1970s. Twenty years later, Evanston and DeKalb followed suit.

U.S. Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky, 9th district, commented that her office in Washington changed their handbook to not discriminate against gender identity.

"We went door to door on Capital Hill . . . Now, 120 offices prohibit gender discrimination on a voluntary basis," she said.