



CONNECTICUT AFL-CIO

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Testimony of Lori J. Pelletier, Secretary-Treasurer, Connecticut AFL-CIO

before the Judiciary Committee

March 26, 2007

Good Afternoon Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and the Members of the Judiciary Committee. I am Lori Pelletier and I serve as Secretary-Treasurer of the Connecticut AFL-CIO. I am here on behalf of our 900 affiliated local unions from all across this great state who represent 220,000 working men and women, and I appreciate the opportunity to address this committee.

HB 7395 AN ACT CONCERNING MARRIAGE EQUALITY, we support this proposed legislation.

Labor has a long history of fighting for equal rights for working people. Included in this proud tradition is support for equal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender workers. Delegates representing over 210,000 union members from all across this state voted overwhelmingly to support a Marriage Equality resolution at their annual convention of the Connecticut AFL-CIO in the fall of 2004. They stated, "trade unionists believe all workers are entitled to a discrimination-free workplace and full parity when it comes to benefits, pay, and treatment; and we believe that our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender brothers and sisters unequivocally deserve the same benefits as their heterosexual counterparts."

Same-sex couples are devoted to each other, they love each other, they have kids and they love their families. Refusing to legally recognize same-sex relationships deprives thousands of families of the most important attributes of their labor: the ability to take care of and provide for their family members.

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It is our belief that same-sex partners deserve the same level of legal protection for their life together as heterosexual partners enjoy. In 2005, the Connecticut General Assembly passed and Governor Rell signed the Civil Union law. At the time, supporters hailed the measure as an important move forward and an interim stop along the long road to recognition of the civil rights of gay and lesbian couples. The recognition of civil unions, although an improvement, was not marriage. The difference between the two is vast.

Civil unions are a legal status created solely for same-sex couples. While they provide important legal protections to couples at the state level, they do not protect these couples when they leave the state. So, same-sex couples who enter into a civil union will be unable to move or travel and be assured their relationships are protected.

Civil unions also omit important federal protections that different-sex couples receive when they are married. There are over 1,138 federal statutes that deal with the benefits and protections linked to marriage (including Social Security) that civil unions do not confer. While federal law must be challenged for same-sex couples to access these rights, with civil unions no challenge is possible.

Most significantly, marriage is more than a collection of legal rights; it tells the community that two people love each other and are a family. It provides dignity, clarity, and is universally understood. Being married is something important, something to aspire to, and something that protects gay and lesbian couples in daily life as well as times of crisis. No other word has that power or can provide that protection.

Clearly, civil unions are a separate status and less than equal status gay and lesbian couples, and this represents real and powerful discrimination. Our constitution requires legal equality for all. By including same-sex couples within existing marriage laws we will achieve the fairest and simplest way to provide both the respect and protections that every citizen deserves.

The good news is that Connecticut citizens are increasingly recognizing these inequities, and support is growing for marriage equality. In a Quinnipiac Poll released on February 15, 2007, a large majority of Connecticut voters (72%) indicated that they believe same-sex couples deserve all the legal rights of married couples that the state can confer. The poll results seem to confirm what casual conversations suggest: Most people will tell you they're in favor of equal rights for gays and lesbians, as in housing, jobs, and public accommodations and they should also have equal access to government benefits, and equal protection of the law.

Why the difference? Well, much of the difference in opinion on civil union and marriage stems from the misunderstanding of the religious implications of gay marriage. Many fear that permitting same-sex marriage would somehow require religious participation in such services. Nothing is further from the truth. Nothing in the proposed law would mandate that any organized religion perform same-sex marriages. The only mandates inherent in the law would be legal, by extending the same constitutional protections to same-sex marriages as heterosexual marriages.

There's no doubt: marriage equality is not a religious matter at all; it is about whom can enter into a legal relationship of commitment and obligations.

To the thousands of same-sex partners and their families who are living, working and paying taxes here in Connecticut, the passage of HB 7395 would provide them with the equality they deserve. No more separate lines at the town hall, just one set of rules for all of the citizens of this "Constitution state" to live by. Connecticut has a proud history of fair and progressive lawmaking, and passage of a marriage equity bill will continue that tradition.

I want to thank this committee for holding this public hearing and if you have any questions I'd be glad to address them.

**Support Civil Marriage
for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Individuals**

Whereas, trade unionists believe all workers are entitled to a discrimination-free workplace and full parity when it comes to benefits, pay, and treatment; and

Whereas, trade unionists, we believe that our gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender brothers and sisters unequivocally deserve the same benefits as their heterosexual counterparts; and

Whereas, trade unions have been securing groundbreaking contracts language that provide our lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender counterparts with a patchwork of protections and benefits; including, explicit anti-discrimination language and pay parity through domestic partnership benefit language; and

Whereas, the United States General Accounting Office has documented over 1,000 federal benefits and protections acquired by civil marriage that are not available through domestic partnerships or civil unions; including the inability to collect social security benefits, worker's compensation, pension or death benefits when their partner dies; or receive benefits under the Family and Medical Leave act to care for a sick partner or child; and

Whereas, State-sanctioned civil marriage provides rights and responsibilities set out in 588 Connecticut laws. These statutes represent a social recognition that provides dignity and respect for the relationship between two people and a network of rights and obligations that reach into every area of a couple's live, and same-gender couples, even those who have been together for 20, 30 or 40 years are denied such respect and dignity; and

Whereas, civil unions of LGBT people cannot equal the benefits and protections of civil marriage.

Therefore be it resolved, that the Connecticut AFL-CIO endorses the right of civil marriage for our lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender brothers and sisters.

Submitted by Connecticut AFL-CIO Executive Officers