



## Advocates Vow to Push for Equal Marriage in N.J.

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After the New Jersey Supreme Court on Oct. 25 ordered the state's legislature to grant the same legal recognition to gay and lesbian partners that heterosexual couples have, advocacy organizations vowed to press for full equal marriage rights, even though many observers believe the outcome will be civil unions.

In *Lewis v. Harris*, the justices ruled that current laws violate equal rights, benefits and protections for the state's gay and lesbian citizens and gave the legislature six months to come up with a solution.

Given the strong opposition to full marriage rights among the state's government leaders, it's likely that legislators will go the civil-union route. Gov. Jon Corzine, a Democrat, and leaders of the Democratic-controlled legislature publicly oppose gay marriage. Thinking it may have avoided the hot-button issue, the legislature in 2004 passed a domestic-partnership law that gives couples some protections, but doesn't go as far as civil unions or full marriage.

While Corzine said he looked forward to seeing how the legislature will carry out the court's ruling, the senate president and assembly speaker issued a joint statement saying they were against defining the new legal arrangement as marriage, but also that they would fight an anti-gay marriage amendment being talked about by some Republicans. The pressure certainly is on, given that legislators are up for reelection in 2007, after the deadline for crafting the new law.

The New Jersey decision attracted national--even international--news coverage, particularly since it was seen as a victory for gay rights after so many recent defeats, most notably the New York Supreme Court ruling that not recognizing equal marriage doesn't violate the state's constitution.

Coming so close to the mid-term elections, Time magazine on its web site even called the ruling an "October Surprise" and speculated that it could be "a welcome boost" for Republicans concerned about firing up conservatives in the wake of the Foley scandal. Time quoted the Rev. Louis Sheldon, head of the right-wing Traditional Values Coalition, as saying "It's going to remind people this issue is paramount."

By the evening of Oct. 25, every major gay advocacy group had issued statements to news media, at least one strongly worded, calling for New Jersey to institute full marriage rights for same-sex partners.

"Those who view today's Supreme Court ruling as a victory for same-sex couples are dead wrong," said Steven Goldstein, chair of Garden State Equality, the state's major gay rights organization. "So help us God, New Jersey's LGBTI community and our millions of straight allies will settle for nothing less than 100 percent marriage equality."

Goldstein announced that New Jersey Assembly Speaker Pro Tem Wilfredo Caraballo and two other legislators will introduce an equal-marriage bill. "Thousands of us will now hit the streets, the phones and the hallways to get this legislation passed," Goldstein said. Garden State Equality immediately began airing a TV commercial calling for full marriage rights.

The national advocacy organization Lambda Legal represented seven New Jersey couples as plaintiffs in *Lewis v. Harris*. David Buckel, Lambda's marriage project director and the lead counsel in the case, said that now that the court has ordered a remedy, "the question for the legislature is an easy one: whether to follow through on the support of the majority of voters in this state to allow their gay friends and neighbors to marry."

In his statement, Human Rights Campaign President Joe Solmonese said: "This decision recognizes that New Jersey's constitution protects all families. The legislature should not go down the path of separate but equal, but rather should embrace marriage equality." He added that HRC will work with Garden State Equality and other allies to press for passage of full marriage rights.

**So will the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "Sadly, we know that politicians on the right and their allies in the anti-gay industry will do everything in their power to exploit this decision for political gain on Nov. 7," Executive Director Matt Foreman said.**

**"Beyond being utterly predictable, [their] shameless tactics are wedge politics at their worst and a sure sign of desperation," Foreman added. "We are confident the vast majority of voters will see them for what they are--reprehensible--and reject them."**

Organizations in both political parties that support gay rights jumped on the bandwagon urging full marriage rights in New Jersey.

"This decision recognizes that committed same-sex couples and their children should have the same protections and responsibilities as straight families," said Patrick Sammon, executive vice president of Log Cabin, the organization for gay Republicans.

Sammon also stated that the New Jersey Supreme Court justices reinforced the opinion of most of the state's voters. According to a February 2006 Zogby poll, 56 percent of New Jersey residents support equal marriage while 39 percent don't.

"It is important that the New Jersey legislature now follow the overwhelming sentiment of voters...by enacting civil marriage legislation," said Jo Wyrick, executive director of the National Stonewall Democrats. She added that the organization is working with Garden State Equality for passage of such a law.

Democratic National Committee Chair Howard Dean equivocated somewhat in his statement. Perhaps mindful of opposition to equal marriage by the New Jersey Democratic leadership, Dean stated, "In the wake of this decision, it remains important that New Jersey and other states continue to work through crucial questions of how best to protect the rights and benefits of all citizens and to avoid divisive efforts to scapegoat groups of people for political gain."

Family Pride, the only organization solely devoted to advocating for GLBT families, said the court ruling speaks to the needs of its constituents. "As the mother of twin four-year-olds, I know how important the protections of marriage are," said Executive Director Jennifer Chrisler. New Jersey legislators must be told "loud and clear that nothing less than marriage is still unequal," she added.

Mary Bonauto, civil rights project director at Boston-based Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders and lead counsel in the landmark Goodridge case that resulted in Massachusetts being the only state with equal marriage, also called on the New Jersey legislature "to do the simplest, fairest and most sensible thing, which is to include gay and lesbian couples within the

existing legal framework of civil marriage."

Bonauto noted that more than 8,500 couples have married in Massachusetts and "large majorities of the public and the legislature now embrace marriage equality." She added that she expects in six months there also will be marriage equality in New Jersey.

GLAD represented Rhode Islanders Mary Norton and Wendy Becker in a case that decided that gays and lesbians from that state could marry in Massachusetts. Marriage Equality Rhode Island, which is pressing the legislature there to pass a bill with full marriage rights, called the New Jersey court ruling "not only historic--the every-day lives of same-sex couples and their families just got better, and we know that stronger families build stronger communities."

While MERI said it is "excited" about any expansion of marriage equality, it remains focused on changing Rhode Island law: "For Rhode Islanders who might want to marry in New Jersey, the outcome of this case is important. For Rhode Islanders who want to marry here in their own state, we need to continue working to change our laws here in the Ocean State."

Noting the extensive media coverage, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, also commented on the court decision. Glenda Testone, senior director of media programs reported that GLAAD is encouraging local and national media outlets to do stories on the plaintiff couples. "We urge the media to continue moving this issue out of the abstract by turning a spotlight on the real families at the heart of today's decision," she stated.