

Oregon Gov. Signs Gay Rights Bills

May 9, 2007

Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski signed two major LGBT civil rights bills Wednesday at a ceremony in front of the legislature. One bill would allow same-sex couples and opposite-sex couples unable to marry to form legally recognized partnerships. The other amends the state's non-discrimination laws to include sexual orientation.

More than 200 people - many of them same-sex couples with their children - cheered as Kulongoski put his name to the two bills.

"[These are] bills that are actually transformational [and show that Oregon is a land of equal opportunity for all our citizens," the governor declared.

Both bills will take effect Jan. 1.

"Our hope is simple," Basic Rights Oregon's Executive Director John Hummel told the crowd. "It is for the day when Oregon families will no longer be forced into uncertainty in times of crisis, and when no Oregonian will be fired from their job, denied housing or denied an education--simply because of who they are or who they love. Today marks a moment in time when Oregonians proudly made hope a reality, and created a fairer, more equal Oregon."

The Portland Gay Men's Chorus sang America the Beautiful.

The Family Fairness Act will grant rights, responsibilities and protections afforded to other Oregon couples and their families currently only available through a marriage contract in Oregon.

The state has a constitutional amendment barring same-sex marriage and the partnership legislation was carefully worded to avoid legal challenges that it was trying to circumvent the terms of the amendment.

It will grant bereavement or sick leave to care for a partner or a partner's child, allow a person to choose a final resting place for a deceased partner, transfer property and assets from a deceased partner to his or her surviving partner if the deceased had no valid will, obtain joint insurance, enter joint rental agreements and get an equitable division of property in a partnership dissolution or annulment.

The Oregon Equality Act would amend the state's non-discrimination laws to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing, employment, public accommodation, education and public services statewide.

LGBT rights groups have been fighting for enactment of the change for more than 30 years.

In 2005 a similar bill passed the Democratically controlled Senate but in the GOP controlled House Republicans refused to let it come to a vote and the bill died on the order table.

Oregon becomes one of four states to recently pass nondiscrimination legislation.

According to a report released Wednesday by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington D-C, "the percentage of the U.S. population living in a jurisdiction protecting lesbian, gay and bisexual people from discrimination [has now risen] to 52 percent, crossing the halfway mark for the first time."

The study also noted that "Five years ago (in 2002) just one state, Vermont with 0.2 percent of the [U.S.] population, offered broad protections to same-sex couples.