



Historic year for pro-gay legislation

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By Lisa Keen

It's official: 2007 is the new banner year for gay civil rights. Three more state legislatures have passed laws to prohibit sexual orientation discrimination and their governors are expected to sign them. And three have passed new laws to provide some form of legal recognition to same-sex relationships.

Prior to this year, 1992 was the year with the greatest number of gains in statewide legislation - that's when California, New Jersey, and Vermont passed statewide civil rights bills to prohibit sexual orientation discrimination.

In addition to a civil unions bill in New Hampshire and a domestic partnership bill in Washington state passed last month, Oregon this month sent a domestic partnership bill to the governor's desk. The bill, which the Oregon House approved last month and the Senate approved May 2, allows same-sex couples to share a number of benefits, including inheritance, child custody and hospital visitation.

In addition to Oregon and Iowa passing a law prohibiting sexual orientation discrimination last month, Colorado passed a bill prohibiting employment discrimination last week. And Vermont's legislature added gender identity and expression.

That's five states this year and six since December when New Jersey passed a civil unions law.

"We'll soon go over the half-way point," predicted Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which has been involved with many of the statewide gay groups which have been pushing for the legislation.

Foreman said that while there may have been some years in which a greater number of pro-gay bills have passed, this year has been the "most productive" in terms of legislation which has the potential to benefit a large number of LGBT people.

He credits two things: the Democrat dominance of the polls last November and the "decades of grassroots work that has primed these bills to pass when the power shifted in the legislatures." Oregon gay activists first introduced their statewide non-discrimination bill 34 years ago, and Colorado 32 years ago. The New Hampshire Freedom to Marry Coalition, noted Foreman, had been working for eight years to lay the groundwork for the civil union bill there. In Colorado, the legislature has passed a non-discrimination bill during the past two years but it was vetoed by then Republican Governor Bill Owens. Democratic Governor Bill Ritter said during the campaign that he would support such legislation. Two years ago, the Rocky Mountain News credited gay activist Tim Gill with having united with "three other wealthy residents" of Colorado to spend \$2 million "to help install a Democratic majority in both houses of the state legislature for the first time in decades."

Foreman also credited Gill with orchestrating a number of wealthy gays -including Jon Stryker of Michigan-- to contribute strategically to state legislative races last November to shift majorities to the Democrats.

And, while efforts to pass anti-gay marriage measures were succeeding in many of these states, they were also educating the public, said Foreman, about the need for legal protections for gay couples. With the addition of Colorado this month, there are now 19 states and the District of Columbia with laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. There are nine states with laws providing for some legal benefits and/or recognition of same-sex couples.