

Between The Lines Newspaper

Victories in the states

Iowa, New Hampshire move forward with Democratic majorities paving way

May 13, 2007

By Lisa Keen

Gay civil rights activists scored two major victories in the states last week, passing non-discrimination legislation in Iowa and a civil unions bill in New Hampshire.

Iowa Governor Chet Culver, a Democrat elected last November, has indicated he will sign the newly passed amendment to the state human rights law, prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. Both his election and the Democratic victory in both the state House and Senate last November, paved the way for enactment of the non-discrimination legislation. Although a signing date has not yet been scheduled, Iowa will become the 18th state plus the District of Columbia to adopt a statewide law prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. **According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, it is the 11th state to ban discrimination based on gender identity. The bill had been pending for 18 years.**

The New Hampshire Senate voted 14 to 10 last week to approve a bill that will extend civil union recognition to same-sex couples. An aide to Democratic Gov. John Lynch said the governor would have the bill on his desk to sign within a week or two.

The law goes into effect Jan. 1, 2008, making the Granite State by far the most conservative state to enact some form of legal recognition of same-sex couples thus far. The legislature was, until last November's election, dominated by Republicans since 1874. But Democrats took control over both the House and the Senate this session, enabling the pro-gay legislation to advance.

Ray Buckley, the openly gay chairman of the state's Democratic Party, said the success of the legislation in New Hampshire, "proves that direct involvement in elections makes a real difference," and he gave considerable credit to the Human Rights Campaign. Both HRC and individual gay donors contributed to Democratic campaigns last November in the push to win a majority of seats in the legislature. Republican leaders in the New Hampshire legislature say they hope passage of the civil unions bill will enable them to make a comeback during the next state elections.

New Hampshire becomes the eighth state, plus the District of Columbia, to enact some form of legal recognition of same-sex couples. It is the fourth state to adopt civil unions. Two states plus Washington, D.C. have domestic partnerships, Hawaii has reciprocal beneficiaries, and Massachusetts has marriage.

Meanwhile, in New York, while Democratic Gov. Eliot Spitzer said last week that he will submit a gay marriage bill to the state legislature this year as promised, the delivery is coming less than two months before the legislative session ends. Most political observers give it little chance of moving. And the Republican majority leader of the state senate signaled as much, noting that Spitzer had also, in the last week, sent through bills on abortion, reapportionment, and court and campaign finance reform. The legislative session is over in mid-June. Gay groups organized a heavy push this week, lining up people to lobby legislators on Tuesday.

In Connecticut, where a same-sex marriage bill has been pending for some months, polls show 49 percent of citizens favor equal rights for gay couples and 46 percent oppose it, a virtual tie given the four-point margin of error.