



Obama renews commitment to gay issues

Pledges come as campaign woos Clinton supporters, hires gay staffers

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Renewing his commitment to gay rights advances, Sen. Barack Obama has pledged to put the weight of his administration behind two key federal bills.

In an open letter to gay voters titled "Obama Pride," the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee said he has long fought to "eliminate discrimination" against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans.

"And as president," he said, "I will place the weight of my administration behind the enactment of the Matthew Shepard Act to outlaw hate crimes and pass a fully inclusive Employment Non-Discrimination Act to outlaw workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity."

The letter, released June 6, came the same day that his campaign appealed to gay supporters of Sen. Hillary Clinton's suspended presidential campaign.

Steve Hildebrand, Obama's deputy campaign manager, said on a conference call with Clinton's gay supporters and other gay voters that their help was wanted and needed for the general election.

He acknowledged "the strength" that Clinton had with gay voters and emphasized that Obama maintains a "rock-solid commitment to gay Americans."

David Mixner, a longtime gay rights activist who initially endorsed former Sen. John Edwards for president, encouraged the call's 1,200 listeners to rally around Obama.

"We've had moments in our history, as a community, where we have an opportunity to create change and make huge advancements," he said. "I believe this is such a moment."

Human Rights Campaign President Joe Solmonese, who also spoke on the call, said the organization was proud to endorse Obama for president. He noted HRC would mobilize its members "like never before" to help Obama win.

Hildebrand noted in that call and another call June 11 that as the campaign's staff expands for the general election, prominent gays would fill several key positions.

Dave Noble, the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force's public policy director, is preparing to leave that position June 20 to become the campaign's full-time gay vote director.

Noble said he would lead a "grassroots mobilization effort" to engage gay voters in each state and noted those efforts would include Obama's campaign maintaining a presence at 60 Pride events across the country.

Hildebrand said lesbian musician Melissa Etheridge would serve as co-chair of the campaign's 50-state voter registration program, while Kevin Jennings, founder of Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, and Joan Garry, a former Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation executive director, would serve as co-chairs of the campaign's gay finance operations.

Garry, a Blade columnist, said this week that she took the volunteer role because Obama "offers America a very new and different vision."

"The campaign has been incredibly welcoming, incredibly fast paced and extraordinarily receptive to the opinions and perspectives of those of us involved," she said. (Read Garry's column on page 46.)

Hildebrand also said that Brian Bond, who served as the gay outreach director for the Democratic National Committee, would move to Chicago to become the campaign's director of constituencies. He noted the role would involve outreach to many voter groups, not just gays.

Tobias Wolff, who chairs Obama's national gay policy committee, said the candidate "understands this is a community that deserves to be courted" beyond the primary contest.

"We will continue to work to be worthy of your trust and your support," Wolff said during the June 6 call. "We certainly don't take it for granted."

Hildebrand irked some gays, however, when he referenced "the gay lifestyle" in the June 11 call.

In discussing how the campaign "messed up" when it allowed anti-gay minister Rev. Donnie McClurkin to join a fundraising tour last year, Hildebrand said there are some "African Americans who do not agree with the gay lifestyle."

Such phrasing is offensive to some gays, since it can be taken to imply that people choose to be gay.

Hildebrand, who is gay, told the Blade after the call that he did not mean to imply that people choose to be gay.

"I certainly know that being gay is not a choice — but I am proud to be gay," he said. "I did not intend to imply anything except that it is important that we try to find common ground with those who are not supportive of LGBT rights."

Obama, in his letter, says he hopes he and his supporters can work inclusively to secure equal rights for gay Americans.

“I will never compromise on my commitment to equal rights for all LGBT Americans,” he said in the letter. “But neither will I close my ears to the voices of those who still need to be convinced. That is the work we must do to move forward together. It is difficult. It is challenging. And it is necessary.”

Obama affirms that he continues to “support the complete repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act,” which allows states to ignore same-sex marriages performed beyond their borders and prevents the federal government from recognizing such unions.

The letter also reiterates his opposition to “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the law barring gays from serving openly in the armed forces, and laws that hinder or preclude gay couples from adopting children.

“As your president, I will use the bully pulpit to urge states to treat same-sex couples with full equality in their family and adoption laws,” he said.

“I personally believe that civil unions represent the best way to secure that equal treatment. But I also believe that the federal government should not stand in the way of states that want to decide on their own how best to pursue equality for gay and lesbian couples — whether that means a domestic partnership, a civil union or a civil marriage.”

The letter was something for Clinton’s supporters to consider after she suspended her campaign last week.

In her speech that day, Clinton twice mentioned gays. At one point, she affirmed her hope that America remains dedicated to equality for all.

“We all want an America defined by deep and meaningful equality,” Clinton said, “from civil rights to labor rights, from women’s rights to gay rights, from ending discrimination to promoting unionization to providing help for the most important job there is: caring for our families.”

At another point, she acknowledged gays as among her supporters.

“Eighteen million of you from all walks of life — women and men, young and old, Latino and Asian, African-American and Caucasian, rich, poor and middle class, gay and straight — you have stood strong with me,” she said. “And I will continue to stand strong with you, every time, every place, and every way that I can. The dreams we share are worth fighting for.”

Garry, who initially backed Clinton, said she was pleased to hear the references.

“I thought Hillary’s speech on Saturday was so eloquent about her role as a woman presidential candidate and the powerful bond that she created between her and so many people all across the country,” she said. “I think Hillary Clinton is incredible and that speech really affirmed that.”

Garry said she had no problem switching camps in February, though, because Obama is such a strong candidate. And she encouraged others to follow her.

“I originally was very emotionally connected to Hillary’s candidacy, but I did my homework and as time went on, I began to listen more closely to Sen. Obama and became increasingly convinced he was the real deal,” she said. “I thought, in my gut, he’d have a better shot of beating McCain. And my instinct tells me that he might just be able to restore some optimism and some goodwill about America around the world.”