

CA not the only state facing marriage challenge

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by Seth Hemmelgarn

As California LGBTs prepare to defeat Proposition 8 with the help of groups like the national Human Rights Campaign, Arizona and Florida are facing similar November ballot measures that would amend those state constitutions to ban same-sex marriage. The focus by HRC on California is drawing a mixed reaction from gay advocates in the other two states.

Rachel Balick, HRC communications coordinator, said the battle in California is a "huge priority" for the organization.

"If we can just work nonstop and devote resources and time, this is such a great opportunity. So many times as California goes, so goes the nation," she said. Balick said California's size means HRC will spend more here than in any other state.

Earlier this year, as efforts were made to try to prevent people from signing the petitions that eventually enabled Prop 8 to qualify for the ballot, HRC provided six staff members to help in California, and contributed \$100,000 in cash.

In May, HRC also pledged an initial \$500,000 from the HRC California Marriage political action committee to Equality for All, the coalition leading the fight against Prop 8. According to HRC, \$375,000 of that amount has been transferred so far.

"The fight to protect marriage equality in California rightfully deserves significant resources," Marty Rouse, HRC national field director, wrote in an e-mail to the *Bay Area Reporter* sent through Balick. In regards to the other two states, Rouse wrote, "Last year, HRC helped provide seed money to the effort to defeat the marriage amendment in Florida" among other assistance given to that state's fight.

In Arizona, where the Legislature just placed the marriage amendment on the November ballot, "HRC is considering how to best support the fight for equality there," Rouse said.

Arizona state Representative Kyrsten Sinema (D), who is bisexual and has been working with HRC on the issue, said, "What happens in California is more important than anywhere else in the nation this year." Sinema said the Arizona amendment's passage would be bad, but "in California people will actually lose marriage rights if this happens."

Steve Smith of the Dewey Square Group is senior campaign consultant for the No on 8 campaign. Smith notes that while many groups are taking part, he said, "HRC has been very involved and will continue to be in fundraising, in voter contact at grassroots level," and in dealing with the media.

Florida

In Florida, where same-sex marriages are already not recognized, there are two main groups working to defeat Amendment 2, the marriage amendment in that state. Florida Red and Blue is one group fighting the measure.

According to Stephen Gaskill, spokesman for Florida Red and Blue, HRC has pledged \$100,000 in cash to the group and so far has contributed \$75,000, which includes \$50,000 in early seed money. Altogether, HRC has contributed \$125,000.

HRC has two representatives on the Florida Red and Blue coalition, and is likely to send one full-time organizer to Florida for the last 12 weeks of the campaign. HRC also had its first Camp

Equality training program in Ft. Lauderdale, which was immediately followed by canvass activities. "The early seed money helped build a volunteer army of hundreds to support the grassroots activities of the coalition," according to Balick.

"We are ecstatic that HRC is one of our partners," Gaskill said. "We are certainly looking forward to having them engaged with the Say No 2 campaign all the way through November."

But Vicki Nantz, who lives in Orlando with her partner Mary Meeks, has withdrawn her support from HRC.

Nantz said that they belonged to HRC's Orlando/Central Florida Federal Club and that they've contributed \$1,200 through monthly \$100 contributions. But she said they became alarmed as HRC's attention shifted from Florida to California, and the couple switched their monthly contributions to Equality Florida.

According to Equality Florida Executive Director Nadine Smith, the organization was one of the founders of Fairness for All Families – the other main group working to defeat Amendment 2.

Nantz said she's been encouraging other Federal Club members to divert contributions from HRC to Equality Florida this year.

She said in light of the California Supreme Court's May 15 decision allowing same-sex couples to marry in the state, she understands the national significance of California's marriage fight, which has also drawn national attention from conservatives and anti-gay groups.

However, in an e-mail to the *B.A.R.*, Nantz wrote HRC's "commitment to Florida and to our 1 million LGBT folks is completely inadequate. They have very obviously abandoned Florida ... I am unlikely to feel good about HRC for a very long time. If we are able to squeak out a victory over Amendment 2, it will not be due to HRC's efforts."

She also wrote, "It is my view that the stakes are much higher, and the potential harm is much greater for Florida's LGBT community than for California's community if the amendments pass."

Nantz said that the Florida amendment includes language that could lead to unmarried straight couples losing their health insurance.

The other main group fighting Amendment 2, Fairness for All Families, is made up of a coalition of groups that includes Florida Red and Blue and the Florida AFL-CIO.

When asked if having two groups could be confusing, Smith said, "Each group brings different focuses and strengths to the fight. Overall it has meant more people working harder to defeat the amendment. To the degree that there's coordination, it's a good thing."

Smith is optimistic the amendment will be defeated.

"We've never seen this kind of coalition formed to fight this kind of issue, and certainly [not] in Florida, so it's a watershed moment," she said. "That's where every ounce of time and energy has to be focused. This is a national fight. Everybody's got a vested interest in seeing these wedge politics defeated in Florida."

Arizona

In Arizona, the marriage amendment just recently made the ballot, so opponents haven't had a lot of time yet to organize a detailed campaign. The last time the state's voters had a chance to amend the constitution to ban same-sex marriages, they rejected it: In 2006, Arizona became the first state in the country to defeat an anti-gay marriage amendment.

HRC was involved in that battle, according to Balick and others. She wrote in an e-mail that HRC worked closely with state legislative allies, including Sinema, to try to stop the amendment from making it to the ballot.

"We're now working with local leadership to determine what the next steps should be since the measure has made it onto the ballot," Balick wrote. "We will follow their lead. HRC is also

targeting Arizona to get more fair-minded legislators elected. It was the legislators who voted to put the measure on the ballot."

Sinema said, "HRC has been our number one earliest and best supporter" in the marriage fight.

Jason Cianciotto, executive director of the Wingspan LGBT center in Tuscon, said he hadn't heard any details yet about HRC's involvement, but since another group – Equality Arizona – is taking the lead in the state, he said he doesn't expect to. Cianciotto said he's hopeful in regards to HRC's involvement.

Officials from Equality Arizona did not respond to several requests for comment for this story.

After the print edition of the B.A.R. went to press, Barbara McCullough-Jones, executive director of Equality Arizona, sent an e-mail statement: "HRC is one of many national partners we rely on throughout the year to move public policy forward in Arizona."

She added that Equality Arizona hopes that "in the context of our work that our national partners will provide resources appropriate to the issue at hand. Whether in-kind or cash contributions we put all help to good use."

Cianciotto said he realizes the fights in California and Florida are hard, but "I think it's possible for the national organizations, including HRC, to support our efforts in the state financially and otherwise and really make a difference."

Cianciotto noted that although financial support is important for spreading the message, national groups like the HRC and the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force** are also needed to provide their expertise and experience.

"When our state is under attack, we look to our national organizations to help us," he said. Cianciotto said a statewide coalition is coming together, and as the scope and the messaging of the campaign is determined, "it will become more clear how national organizations can be of help to us."

Like Nantz in Florida, Cianciotto worries that if the amendment in his state passes, it will be used for more than just banning same sex-marriage. Cianciotto said he'd like assurance from backers of the proposal that they don't have any interest in taking away health care and other benefits that result from domestic partnerships.

Sinema, an attorney, said, "My legal analysis of the referendum is that it would not have an impact on unmarried relationships in Arizona."

California fundraising

One source of funding for HRC's initial \$500,000 pledge is the group's July 26 gala in San Francisco, where protesters are expected to gather – they're upset with HRC for supporting a federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act that excludes protection for transgender people.

Dewey Square's Smith declined to state specifically how much Equality for All plans to raise for the effort to defeat Prop 8, but he said the coalition is going to raise at least as much as Prop 8's supporters.

A Protectmarriage.com official has been quoted in the *Sacramento Bee* as saying the group hopes to raise \$10 million to \$15 million to support the measure. A Prop 8 official did not provide comment for this story by press time.

"We'll be in every major media market," Smith said. "We'll have the money we need to communicate with the voters. California's an expensive state to do politics in" but, he said, "I have no doubt of our ability to match [Prop 8 supporters] dollar for dollar."

Data filed with the secretary of state's office indicate the Equality for All coalition has received contributions over \$2.2 million since January 2007. About \$1.6 million of that money came in the first six months of this year. Complete current data are not yet publicly available.

Equality for All has also started a campaign urging people to vow to vote no on the marriage ban. Smith said the goal is "to get as many people as possible publicly identified with the campaign so we can communicate with them" and turn them into contributors and volunteers.