

Activists hail 'historic' platform

Dem document calls for end to 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell,' DOMA but omits the 'g word'

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A final draft of the Democratic Party's 2008 platform strengthens the party's support for gay civil rights and for the first time calls for an end to discrimination based on gender identity.

The document, which is to be presented to the Democratic National Convention in Denver later this month for final approval, also includes what gay Democratic activists described as strongly worded language opposing the Defense of Marriage Act and "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," which bars openly gay people from serving in the military.

But the platform draft approved Aug. 9 by the party's 186-member Platform Committee omits any mention of the words "gay" or "lesbian," which had been included in the Democrats' 2004 platform.

The document, discussed by Democratic officials and gay and transgender activists during a conference call Monday with reporters, was not publicly available at that time. A spokesperson for the Democratic National Committee said the DNC expected to release the Aug. 9 draft approved by the platform panel in Pittsburgh later this week.

According to Democratic officials who have seen it, the document also omits a provision in the 2004 platform that declared the party's opposition to a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage, which the 2004 document called a divisive effort backed by President Bush to "politicize the constitution."

Leaders of six national gay and transgender advocacy organizations, including the National Stonewall Democrats, nevertheless hailed the 2008 document as the strongest platform on gay and transgender issues ever approved by a major U.S. political party.

"The 2008 Democratic national platform is by far the most pro-equality platform in Democratic history," said U.S. Rep. Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.), the only openly lesbian member of Congress.

Baldwin, who served on a 15-member platform drafting committee, called the document's gay and transgender provisions "historic" and predicted they would set the tone for expanding the rights of "all LGBT people" during the next several years.

She noted that inclusion in the final draft of language opposing discrimination based on gender identity represents the first time non-discrimination language covering transgender persons has appeared in the party's platform. For nearly 20 years, the Democratic platforms have included provisions opposing discrimination based on sexual orientation, which is said to cover gay, lesbian and bisexual people.

Baldwin said the 2008 document's strongly stated opposition to the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy

on gays in the military was another important breakthrough for the party. The 2004 platform includes a vague call for opening the military to “all” qualified Americans, but makes no specific mention of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

She also noted the gay and transgender rights provisions were “fully supported” by Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama, who is the party’s presumptive presidential nominee.

Baldwin joined two Democratic Platform Committee members — lesbian State Rep. Patricia Todd of Alabama and transgender and AIDS activist Diego Sanchez of Massachusetts — in Monday’s telephone conference call, where they answered questions about the platform from reporters with the gay media. The conference call was organized by National Stonewall Democrats, a gay partisan group that pushed for including gay and trans related provisions in the document.

“It’s a tremendous honor to be the first transgender person appointed by a DNC chair to the Platform Committee,” Sanchez said during the conference call.

“I believe the platform reflects incredible educational and persuasive work that’s been done by organizations and people and that it’s been done for years,” he said. “It shows the party’s desire and its readiness for inclusion.”

19 gays on Democratic platform committee

DNC Chair Howard Dean appointed Sanchez to the Platform Committee as part of a group of gay and transgender Democrats that Dean named to Democratic Convention standing committees.

A list released by National Stonewall Democrats shows that a total of 19 gays or lesbians, along with Sanchez, served on the Platform Committee, with most being appointed by party leaders in nine states.

Gay Democrat Jay Fissette, an elected member of the Arlington County Board, and lesbian Democrat Ingrid Duran are members of the Platform Committee from Virginia. Gay Democrat Luke Clippinger is a member of the platform panel from Maryland, according to the list.

An earlier draft of the platform, which circulated among activists and party leaders last week, drew criticism from some gay activists and bloggers, who said it appeared to have weakened a provision in the 2004 Democratic platform addressing gay families.

The 2004 provision states, “We support full inclusion of gay and lesbian families in the life our nation and seek equal responsibilities, benefits and protections for these families.”

The earlier draft of the 2008 platform, which was approved by the smaller platform drafting panel on which Baldwin served, stated, “We support the full inclusion of all families in the life of our nation and support equal responsibility, benefits, and protections.”

Baldwin said she and other members of the full platform committee proposed an amendment to add “more specificity” to the gay family provision. She said the Obama campaign and the full Platform Committee agreed to include the gay amendment in an omnibus “manager’s amendment” that the full committee approved on Aug. 9. The text of that amendment was not available at press time.

But in the telephone briefing held for reporters on Monday, Baldwin said the revised provision states that “all families, including same-sex couples,” should receive full rights and benefits.

Baldwin and Todd acknowledged that unlike the 2004 platform, the 2008 document doesn't specifically mention the words "gay" or "lesbian." The two said party leaders did not pressure the platform's drafters to leave out those words, or the words "bisexual" or "transgender."

According to Baldwin and Todd, they and other gay and lesbian members of the committee believe using the terms "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" fully and adequately covered gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

"If the story is about four words being missing, it would not be reporting that millions of our lives are included in this document," said Jon Hoadley, executive director of National Stonewall Democrats.

Hoadley said the "four words" are not specified in most gay rights legislation, including current and past versions of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. Differing versions of that proposed law have called for prohibiting employment discrimination based on "sexual orientation" and "gender identity," which sponsors of the bill say represents gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

'Is the platform perfect? No.'

Some gay activists who have seen the platform's gay-related provisions also noted that the document did not use the new name given to a hate crimes bill, which the platform strongly supports. The platform describes the bill as the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act rather than the renamed version of the identical bill, the Matthew Shepard Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act. Shepard was a gay college student in Wyoming who was murdered in a notorious anti-gay hate crime that became the subject of U.S. and international media coverage.

"The platform addresses many of our community's critical issues, however it does not explicitly use the words gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender," said Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign.

"While this has prompted much discussion, it is our responsibility as a community in this election to compare this document with the soon-to-be-adopted Republican platform and to judge which party would best advocate for us," Solmonese said.

"Is the platform perfect?" said Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force. "No. There is much more work to be done, especially to improve issues of family recognition. However, is it a good foundation? Unequivocally yes," Carey said.

Reporters participating in the telephone briefing Monday noted that the platform mentions other minorities such as blacks, Latinos and Asian Americans, and asked Baldwin and Todd whether party leaders talked about not mentioning the "G" word. Freelance reporter and former Washington Blade editor Lisa Keen noted that the platform drafters' apparent reluctance to "say the word" appeared to be in marked contrast to Barack Obama, who has been praised by gay activists for frequently mentioning gay and transgender people in campaign appearances before both gay and non-gay audiences.

"Was there any discussion about, 'Let's don't say the word so the Republicans won't go through our platform with a fine tooth comb?'" Keen asked.

"I can tell you that's absolutely not true," Todd said. "There was never any discussion about keeping it out."

“So just by accident the word gay never got into this document?” Keen asked in a follow-up question.

“Nothing was by accident,” Todd said. “I think we were trying to be very clear on the particular policy issues we were talking about.”

Baldwin said no one at the platform drafting committee meetings held in Cleveland earlier this month objected to the words “gay” or “lesbian,” either. She said drafters selected the terms sexual orientation and gender identity through careful “wordsmithing,” which she said was aimed at crafting the platform toward a legislative approach to non-discrimination.

Baldwin separately noted that the party remains opposed to a constitutional amendment that would ban same-sex marriage. Although there is no wording specifying that in the final draft of the 2008 platform, opposition to a constitutional ban on gay marriage is implied by the stated opposition to the Defense of Marriage Act, Baldwin said.

That statute, also known as DOMA, says the U.S. government shall only recognize the unions of one man and one woman, and grants states the authority to ignore same-sex marriages conferred by other states.

An earlier draft of the Democratic Party platform, when updated to reflect the changes announced Monday, addresses gay and transgender and AIDS-related issues as follows:

- “Democrats will fight to end discrimination based on race, sex, ethnicity, national origin, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, age and disability in every corner of our country, because that’s the America we believe in.”
- “We support the full inclusion of all families, including same-sex couples, in the life of our nation, and support equal responsibility, benefits, and protections. We will enact a comprehensive bipartisan Employment Non-Discrimination Act. We oppose the Defense of Marriage Act and all attempts to use this issue to divide us.”
- “We will pass the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act because hate crimes desecrate sacred spaces and belittle all good people.”
- “We will also put national security above divisive politics. More than 10,000 service men and women have been discharged on the basis of sexual orientation since the ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy was implemented, at a cost of over \$360 million. Many of those forced out had special skills in high demand, such as translators, engineers and pilots. At a time when the military is having a tough time recruiting and retaining troops, it is wrong to deny our country the service of brave, qualified people. We support the repeal of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ and the implementation of policies to allow qualified men and women to serve openly regardless of sexual orientation.”
- “We support a comprehensive national strategic plan to combat HIV/AIDS and a Ryan White Care Act designed and funded to meet today’s epidemic, that ends ADAP waiting lists, that focuses on the communities such as African Americans and Latino Americans who are disproportionately impacted through an expanded and renewed Minority HIV/AIDS initiative, and on new epicenters such as the Southern part of our nation.”

In addition to the National Stonewall Democrats, the national gay groups that announced strong support for the 2008 platform included the Human Rights Campaign, **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**, Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, National Center for Transgender Equality, and Family Equality Council.

