



LGBT, AIDS Advocates Extol Democratic Platform

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08/15/2008

An all-but-final draft of the 2008 Democratic Party platform, approved by the full 186-member Platform Committee at an August 9 meeting in Pittsburgh, puts the party on record in opposition to the federal Defense of Marriage Act, in support of a "comprehensive" Employment Non-Discrimination Act, and more generally in favor of the fight to end discrimination against numerous categories of Americans, including those who are gay, lesbian, and transgendered.

And in two significant amendments to a version of the platform adopted by a smaller drafting committee just one week earlier in Cleveland, the latest iteration strengthened the party's explicit commitment to LGBT families and voiced support for the development of a comprehensive national strategy on combating HIV/AIDS.

The Pittsburgh draft is what will be presented for approval at the Democratic National Convention in Denver at the end of this month. Further changes to the language are not widely expected.

In an August 11 telephone press briefing organized by the National Stonewall Democrats, leading LGBT advocates hailed the posture the national party has assumed heading into the November elections.

Diego Sanchez, a top official at the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts, termed the platform "an historic landmark," noting in particular the AIDS plank, specific mention of families headed by "same-sex couples," and the national party's first-ever endorsement of nondiscrimination protections for transgendered Americans. The co-chair of the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition and a new member of the Human Rights Campaign Business Council, Sanchez is the first transgendered person to serve on the Democratic Party Platform Committee.

Mara Keisling, the executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE), noted how smoothly language barring discrimination based on gender identity and expression was incorporated into the draft platform, and the fact that from that point on "there was never any debate about it being taken out."

Keisling also praised the party for standing up to proposals that would require that voters present identification in order to cast ballots, noting that such basic personal documents often trip up transgendered people whose legal name and gender presentation may not be perceived by others to match up.

Aubrey Sarvis, executive director of the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, which advocates for gay and lesbian military personnel, pointed to the platform's commitment to end the discriminatory Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy.

"Four years ago, it was very hard to find mention of Don't Ask, Don't Tell in the platform," Sarvis said. "This year, the statement is bold and vigorous."

The drafting committee included US Representative Tammy Baldwin, an out lesbian from Madison, Wisconsin, and among New Yorkers on the full Platform Committee are Dr. Marjorie

Hill, president of the Gay Men's Health Crisis, and Matt Morningstar, a Wall Street attorney who is the political director of the New York Democratic Lawyers Council, the voting rights project of the state party, and who serves on the GMHC board.

Compared to the 2004 platform, the most significant advance in this year's document is language stating, "We oppose the Defense of Marriage Act and oppose all attempts to use this issue to divide us." The 2004 platform condemned President George W. Bush's effort at the time to pass a constitutional amendment barring marriage by same-sex couples, but was silent on DOMA.

The new language, however, did not specifically pledge to repeal the 1996 law. During the primary campaign, Illinois Senator Barack Obama, the presumptive nominee, called for its repeal, while his chief rival, New York Senator Hillary Clinton, argued the clause denying federal recognition of same-sex marriage should be overturned, but the law's second provision, enabling states to deny recognition to same-sex marriages from other jurisdictions, should not be tampered with. She warned that repealing that provision ran the risk of reinvigorating the now-dormant push for a federal constitutional amendment.

Baldwin, on Monday's press call, dismissed the difference between the notion of opposing and that of pledging to repeal as insignificant, explaining that the opposition is intended to refer to the law "in its entirety."

"The platform is not an action plan, it is statement of values and policy," she said. "It is up to members of the party" to advance the broad goals outlined in the document.

Rea Carey, the executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, emphasized the new platform's commitment to battling discrimination generally based on all the categories protected by the 1964 Civil Rights Act and its subsequent amendments - and making specific reference to sexual orientation and gender identity. That pledge, which precedes more specific language regarding the long-pending Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), suggests that Democrats are prepared to look at anti-bias protections beyond the narrow scope of the workplace in other areas of life, such as housing, credit, and public accommodations.

In the context of ENDA, the reference to gender identity and expression is significant. The version of ENDA passed last fall by the US House deleted language protecting transgendered Americans, a retreat strongly opposed by Baldwin and more than 300 LGBT organizations.

In Pittsburgh, the platform drafters corrected a glaring retreat from the 2004 document. Four years ago, the platform read, "We support full inclusion of gay and lesbian families in the life of our nation and seek equal responsibilities, benefits, and protections for these families." The language that came out of Cleveland read simply, "We support full inclusion of all families in the life of our nation and seek equal responsibility, benefits, and protections."

This past Saturday the phrase "all families" was strengthened to read "all families, including same-sex couples." Still the use of "same-sex" rather than "gay and lesbian" raised several questions on Monday's press call - the words gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender do not appear anywhere in the platform. Those hosting the call were quick to point out that in policy and in legislation, the LGBT community is not typically named but rather identified as part of categories given legal protections - based on sexual orientation or gender identity and expression, for example - or based on relationship type, such as same-sex.

"This is the language that is used in policy," argued Jon Hoadley, executive director of the National Stonewall Democrats, when pressed on this point. "We were intentionally trying to model on that language."

Still, when several popular blog sites highlighted the lack of gay or transgender appearing in the

document, numerous posts bemoaned that fact.

And it is striking that among the Democrats who contested their party's presidential nomination this year, it was Obama, the winner, who most frequently used the word gay in his speeches.

In endorsing faith-based social services, as have been advocated by Obama, the platform states that the party will work to ensure that these efforts "do not endanger First Amendment protections and that public funds are not used to proselytize or discriminate," a guarantee the Bush administration pointedly refused to make. Obama's announcement earlier this summer that he supports such programs prompted widespread criticism in the LGBT community and among other Americans concerned about protecting the church-state divide.

The Democrats call for more funding for HIV/AIDS prevention and care and specifically voice support for increasing Medicaid coverage for low-income Americans living with HIV. But the Pittsburgh draft dramatically expanded the discussion of domestic AIDS policy over the version that came out of Cleveland, committing the party to supporting the development of a national strategy and to the full funding of the federal Ryan White Care Act to make certain state drug assistance programs no longer have waiting lists and that high infection rates in communities of color are addressed.

Sanchez credited GMHC's Hill with playing a lead role in strengthening the AIDS plank.

The newest draft, however, is silent on the issue of funding abstinence-based prevention efforts, which have been shown to be ineffective but were nevertheless allowed to stay in this year's budget by the Democratic-controlled Congress.

The platform also endorses spending \$50 billion over five years on global AIDS issues and suggests that the Democrats would be more willing than the current administration to have that money spent through the Global Fund established in 2002 at the behest of the United Nations. Though President Bush has contributed some money to the Global Fund, the bulk of the US global commitment to date has gone through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR. That effort has included significant funding for abstinence-only prevention efforts.

One item in the platform that stirred negative comment during Monday's press call was a passage discussing the importance of fathers in society: "Too many fathers are missing - missing from too many lives and too many homes. Children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and are more likely to commit crime, drop out of school, abuse drugs and end up in prison."

Alabama State Representative Patricia Todd, an out lesbian who served on the Platform Committee, acknowledged her understanding that the passage targets those parents who do not accept responsibility for the care of their children, but said, "The whole section on fathers bothered me." She noted that the language could be taken out of context as an attack on families headed by lesbian couples.

Still, Todd said, she had other priorities at the Pittsburgh session, and Baldwin, saying she had not been part of the discussion about this language the week before in Cleveland, explained simply, "This portion was very important to Senator Obama."

NCTE's Keisling, who pointed out the language to Gay City News in advance of the August 11 press call, said it was "offensive," but also expressed appreciation for what its intended meaning was.

And, she said, Stonewall's Hoadley had worked to get it revised, something Keisling said might still be possible before the platform's formal adoption in Denver.

Stonewall did not respond to a request for comment on this issue.