



Gay activists meet with Obama transition team

Leaders seek high-level gay appointees, policy changes

By CHRIS JOHNSON

Dec. 19, 2008

Gay activists met with members of President-elect Barack Obama's transition team last week in a two-hour session focused on policy issues and presidential appointments, according to gay group leaders.

Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, said transition leaders were "very receptive" to requests from gay activists.

"I think they went to great lengths to explain their vision for how [policy initiatives] would work and how our community would be a part of that," he said.

Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, said transition team officials were attentive during the meeting and very appreciative of the clarity of recommended policy changes.

"They were taking notes, they were listening, they were responding, they were asking questions, they were a very, very engaged transition team and that bodes well for our community moving forward," she said.

About 60 people attended the Dec. 10 meeting, including transition leaders such as John Podesta, co-chair of Obama's transition team; Jim Messina, who is in charge of Obama's personnel decisions; Mike Strautmanis, director of public liaison and intergovernmental affairs; Melanie Barnes, whom Obama tapped to become the White House's domestic policy director; and Parag Mehta, the transition team's liaison for minority groups, according to activists.

Gay members of the transition team also attended the meeting, Solmonese said, including Roberta Achtenberg, Elaine Kaplan and Fred Hochberg.

The Obama transition team did not respond to a request for comment on the meeting.

Appointing more openly gay people to high positions in the Obama administration was a major focus of the meeting.

Chuck Wolfe, president of the Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund, urged Obama's team to give serious consideration to appointing former Interior Department Assistant Secretary for Policy Management & Budget John Berry, who is gay, to a cabinet post. Obama later chose U.S. Sen. Ken Salazar (D-Colo.) for the job.

"President-elect Obama promises a diverse administration filled with talented individuals from all walks of life," Wolfe said during the meeting, according to his prepared remarks. "This must include gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans. Anything less is not fully inclusive, and

that could be seen as an indication that our community is little more than an ATM for campaigns.”

Solmonese said Wolfe had “a very legitimate point” and “there is going to be that censure if there is not a high-level person” in the Obama administration who is openly gay.

Obama has noted “his vision of diversity and a diverse administration very clearly includes GLBT Americans,” Solmonese said, adding that he thinks “there is an expectation that he will hold true to that, now that he’s been elected president.”

Carey said activists also told transition officials that the gay community is interested in being part of the major issues of the day, including the economic crisis or health care reform.

Activists made it clear that the gay community wants to be “part of creating solutions to these problems” and asked transition officials to make sure that “LGBT people are not left behind when these discussions are taking place,” Carey said.

Besides Berry, activists urged the transition team to consider bringing into the administration Mary Beth Maxwell, a lesbian and founding executive director of American Rights at Work, who is being considered for labor secretary, and Hochberg, a gay man who is being considered to head up the Small Business Administration, Solmonese said.

Last week, Obama brought in the first openly gay person to a prominent position in his administration by tapping Nancy Sutley, deputy mayor of Los Angeles for energy and environment, to head the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

“Our point is we will be happy if there is a cabinet-level appointment,” Wolfe said. “Anything less than a cabinet-level appointment would demonstrate that they did not hear us.”

NON-LEGISLATIVE CHANGES URGED

Solmonese said his role at the meeting was to discuss non-legislative changes that Obama’s administration could make to improve the lives of gay and transgender Americans.

He said he presented the transition team an 80-page document of proposed changes.

A coalition of gay activist groups compiled the recommendations, Solmonese said, and HRC was responsible for drafting proposed executive orders that would make the changes.

A 12-page executive summary of the document outlines the recommendations, which include expanding President Clinton’s executive order barring discrimination in the federal workplace on the basis of sexual orientation to include gender identity. Additionally, the document calls on Obama to develop a national HIV/AIDS strategy and to fund scientifically based programs to confront diseases affecting gay people.

Other recommendations include:

- Changing rules in the State Department so that the partners of gay Foreign Service officers can receive the same benefits as the spouses of their straight counterparts. The partners of gay Foreign Service officers are currently denied access to certain medical facilities, language training and emergency evacuation.
- Expanding an existing executive order to require that the federal government only hire contractors that have non-discrimination provisions for sexual orientation and gender identity categories.

- For transgender people, allowing the Internal Revenue Service to provide reimbursements for medical expenses incurred in the gender-transition process through tax-preferred flexible spending accounts. Also, allowing transgender people to change their gender markers on federal documents and records, including passports.
- Developing a plan to guide Congress in repealing “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” which prohibits openly gay people from serving in the military.
- Having the Justice Department issue a ruling to clarify that interstate domestic violence and stalking provisions under the Violence Against Women Act apply in situations where the offender and the victims are of the same gender.
- Removing HIV from the list of “communicable disease[s] of public health significance” to allow HIV-positive foreign nationals to enter the United States.
- Nominating judges who have “a temperament that would enable them to make decisions fairly and with an open mind.”

Solmonese didn’t set a timeline for the administration to implement the suggested changes, but said Obama could act on them as soon as he takes office.

“I think the intention is certainly there,” Solmonese said, “it’s just that ... you need to have the right policy people and the right legal team in place to ... actually implement them in an appropriate way.”

Solmonese said other gay activists who attended the meeting included H. Alexander Robinson, executive director of the National Black Justice Coalition, who discussed HIV/AIDS; Mara Keisling, executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, who discussed trans issues; and Len Hirsch, president of Federal Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Employees (GLOBE), who discussed personnel.

The Dec. 10 meeting was not the only time this month that gay activists have met with transition team leaders. David Smith, HRC’s director of policy and strategy, said gay leaders also met Dec. 11 with officials making the transition decisions for executive departments.