



Civil unions bill moves to House floor

By ANDREA ZELINSKI
March 6, 2009

Supporters of gay marriage say 2009 could be the year Illinois seriously considers establishing civil unions, but opponents say the pendulum of public support is swinging the other way.

A bill giving gay couples the right to form civil unions squeaked through a legislative committee Thursday. It would not legalize same-sex marriage, but it would give gay couples many of the legal benefits of marriage.

Rep. Deb Mell, who is gay, said 648 state laws – on topics from inheritance to health care – help married couples.

“I find it very strange that I can be elected to the General Assembly and vote on rules and laws, but these don’t apply to me and my family,” said Mell, D-Chicago. “We’re not protected.”

The bill was approved, 4-3, by the House Youth and Family Committee. Similar legislation also made it to the House floor last year, but the sponsor said he never had enough support to call it for a vote.

Supporters say that could change this year as people grow more accustomed to the idea of same-sex marriages and civil unions.

Gay couples now can marry in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Civil unions are granted in Vermont, New Jersey, California and New Hampshire, according to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Oregon, Washington and the District of Columbia issue domestic partnerships.

“The more people talk to people about this – person to person, neighbor to neighbor – there’s no reason for this not to pass,” said Evan Wolfson, director of New York-based group Freedom to Marry.

Opponents, however, argue that trends are moving in their direction.

In November, 52 percent of California voters elected to change the state constitution, defining marriage as exclusively between a man and a woman. The Illinois committee’s action came on the same day that the California Supreme Court heard arguments on challenges to that vote.

“If there’s growing support for anything, there’s growing support for marriage between one man and one woman,” said Austin R. Nimocks, senior legal counsel for the Alliance Defense Fund, advocating for every family to have a mom and a dad.

Opponents say the civil unions bill is really a bill for gay marriage.

“Don’t be misled. The legislation is all about same-sex marriage,” said Robert Gilligan, executive director for the Catholic Conference of Illinois.

Groups speaking out against the bill claim gay marriage would jeopardize families, tarnish traditional marriage or force churches and businesses to endorse relationships they find immoral.

In a civil union, couples would have the same legal rights as married couples. For instance, people couldn’t be turned away when trying to visit a sick partner in the hospital and they would have authority to make medical decisions for their partners.

The sponsor, Rep. Greg Harris, D-Chicago, was happy about the committee vote but said the real battle is rounding up enough votes in the full House.

“It’s something that’s very much on the front burner,” said Harris. “The tougher discussion will be on the floor.”