

Portland rally to support House bill that would stop gay discrimination

By Shawn Wirtz
Of the Emerald

A rally will be held in Portland tonight in support of a House bill introduced Friday that, if passed, will prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

"Essentially we're talking about an omnibus bill that relates to discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodations," said Dave Fidanque, associate director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon.

The ACLU and several religious, feminist and gay activist organizations are sponsors of the proposal. "We have spent a great deal of time over the last few months trying to build a broad base of support," Fidanque said.

Current state law prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, race, religion, national origin, age and marital status. "What we're talking about is adding the phrase sexual orientation to that list," Fidanque said.

Homosexuals are the "one minority group in our society against whom there is a great deal of discrimination that is not protected by state laws," Fidanque said. The bill is an effort at extending the civil rights protections other groups in society already have, he said.

Discrimination in reaction to the AIDS virus, which is most prevalent in homosexual men, has in some ways pushed the need for the bill, Fidanque said.

People with physical or mental handicaps already are protected against discrimination by law, and last year Labor and Industries Commissioner Mary Wendy Roberts determined that AIDS victims fall under the category of physically handicapped, Fidanque said.

"The problem is that it's very subtle discrimination," Fidanque said. For example, he said, many times someone only suspected of being gay is fired.

"I could tell you story after story about what has happened to people concerning medical

care and housing," said Lisa "Tora" Shulman, a member of the University Gay and Lesbian Alliance and the ACLU Commission on Gay and Lesbian Rights.

The commission is a statewide organization "trying to help get the nuts-and-bolts grass roots together," Fidanque said. The commission hopes to raise \$10,000 to hire a lobbyist for this issue specifically, and Fidanque expects pledges of up to \$5,000 after tonight's rally, he said.

"Many people feel that they can't come into this office because they're afraid their career would be in danger," Shulman said. As an example of discrimination she cited a rental

agency employee who told a friend that they didn't rent to "dykes."

"We aren't unrealistic in thinking that we can legislate feelings," Shulman said. Fidanque added, "We expect the opponents will be there as they have in the past."


However, both are hopeful that the legislation will be successful. "For the first time in eight years we have a governor who would not veto it and in fact would support it. That's the critical thing," Fidanque said.

The rally will be held at the Portland Metropolitan Community Church at the corner of N.E. 24th and Broadway. Secretary of State Barbara Roberts will address the crowd.

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