

DA proposes protections for gays, lesbians

Multnomah County District Attorney Michael D. Schrunk's bill would expand an existing law banning intimidation.

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

People who threaten or physically harass gays and lesbians would become subject to criminal prosecution under a bill introduced in the Oregon House of Representatives January 11. The bill would expand a 1981 law banning intimidation against people based on their race, color, religion, or national origin.

The measure, proposed on behalf of Multnomah County District Attorney Michael D. Schrunk's office and backed by Gov. Neil Goldschmidt, drew opposition from Oregon Citizens' Alliance (OCA) executive director Lon Mabon, who argued it would grant just the kind of "special protections" for gays and lesbians that Oregon voters rejected when they passed Measure 8.

Norm Frink, chief deputy district attorney in Schrunk's office, said he proposed the addition of "sexual orientation" to the existing intimidation law after reading an *Oregonian* editorial about racist Skinheads, who preach a philosophy of hate against Jews, gays and lesbians. Blacks and other racial minorities. The bill is an effort "to nip this type of conduct in the bud," he said.

"I can't represent to you that there's a specific crisis this is responding to," Frink said. "But it's a problem that needs to be addressed; it's a problem that people need to be sensitive to."

The 1981 law defines tampering with someone's property, threatening physical injury or physically harassing them on the basis of race, color, religion or national origin as a class-A misdemeanor. If two or more persons act together to intimidate an individual the crime becomes a class-C felony.

Mabon said the bill seemed to contradict the message voters delivered in November, when they repealed Goldschmidt's executive order banning discrimination in state hiring and services based on sexual orientation.

"If this is a political attempt to get sexual orientation into an existing civil rights category, then we oppose it," he said. "I don't look at sexual orientation as being something that deserves special protection when I, and a

majority of citizens, believe it is abnormal."

Frink maintained that the bill, introduced by the House Judiciary Committee, is not a matter of civil rights, but of sanctioning criminals.

"What we're talking about is trying to deal with people who are committing criminal acts. We're not creating special rights for anybody. I think it's very disappointing that anyone would be opposed to this," said Frink.

The incidence of violence and verbal abuse against gays and lesbians drew attention on the national level last year. In May, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill requiring the U.S. Justice Department to collect statistics on "hate crimes" committed against gays and lesbians, as well as racial and other minorities. A similar measure passed the Senate Judiciary Committee but never made it to the Senate floor.

Still, local and regional surveys leave no doubt that physical and verbal harassment of gays and lesbians is real. In a recent *Just Out* survey of 200 respondents, 66 percent said they had experienced verbal abuse based on their sexual orientation; 15 percent said they had experienced physical abuse.

Cathy Siemens, who was recently appointed to the Metropolitan Human Relations Commission, said the measure, if passed, would be a decisive step in the right direction. She added that measures such as higher penalties for crimes of intimidation and detailed gathering of statistics on such incidents also are needed to fight hate crimes effectively.

"As many reports have shown, lesbians and gays are a high-risk group in terms of the number of cases of violence," said John Baker, head of the Right-to-Privacy Political Action Committee. "This is what the legislation will be aimed at correcting. Hopefully, legislators have learned in the past couple years that there is a lot of discrimination and a lot of violence out there against lesbians and gays." Baker said opposition to the measure from the OCA was a predictable move. "If they had their way, they would like to see us not protected by laws and regulations at all."

People with AIDS need jobs

Cory Baker, a Brinker Trust Board Member, talks with many PWAs. "If I could only find some work," they tell me. They hate to continually accept charity. If they could find only a few hours of employment per month, that would give them back their self-esteem."

So Baker, who is retired from the Oregon State Employment Office, is seeking work for PWAs.

"This is casual labor," he says. "Mostly white collar work like office work, and only two

or three hours a month. That way, employers don't have to worry about taxes, et cetera. They can just pay cash. The only thing employers need to know is that these men can't be entirely reliable. Tom Smith may feel good the night before, but not able to make it to work in the morning."

Many of the PWAs Baker sees as a result of his work with Esther's Pantry, are living on such meager existences that a few hours a month might make all the difference, he says.

For more information call Cory Baker at 245-7428.

— K.C. de Gutes



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