

national briefs

ARIZONA

The Pima County Board of Supervisors voted last month to begin development of insurance coverage for domestic partners—issues still up in the air include who would qualify for the benefits, how relationships would be verified, and how often employees would be allowed to change partners on their insurance.

Tucson City Manager Luis Gutierrez, who originally brought the matter before the board on behalf of a group of employees with same-sex partners, is recommending that the municipality offer benefits only to same-sex domestic partners. According to the *Arizona Daily Star*, the council was split over Gutierrez' proposal. If enacted, the proposal would reportedly cost the city about \$27,000, while including unmarried heterosexuals would raise the price tag to \$126,000. Some council members agree with Gutierrez' reasoning that the opposite-gender couples always have the option to make a legal commitment to receive insurance benefits.

CALIFORNIA

Beginning Jan. 1, 1998, Chevron Corp. will extend a host of benefits to same- and opposite-sex domestic partners of its U.S. employees and the partners' eligible children. According to a press statement from the Chevron Lesbian and Gay Employee Association, the benefits include medical and dental coverage, dependent life insurance, relocation, bereavement leave and family medical leave. Chevron will also modify its retirement plan to create a death benefit for non-married employees, and will continue to offer these benefits to employees who retire after Dec. 31, 1997.

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A study conducted by Oakland's Applied Research Center indicates that at least 28 California schools are teaching illegal abstinence-only sex education programs that deny students access to information about contraception and the risks of HIV infection. The study, released April 29, reveals that those programs also give inaccurate information about AIDS and are strongly biased against minorities, including queers, reports United Press International.

One program in particular, called "Sex Respect," was found to be extremely biased and inaccurate: It teaches that HIV can "pass through the pores of a latex condom" and that abortions result in heavy blood loss, infections and future pregnancy complications.

The study also found that 34 percent of California's public school districts have been pressured to modify their sex education programs by religious groups.

COLORADO

Gloria Velasquez, author of *Tommy Stands Alone*, a book about a Latino boy's homosexuality, is accusing a Longmont middle school of censorship for taking the book away from sixth graders who were reading it as a class project.

Principal Will Masters told Boulder's *Daily Camera* that the action was necessary because the book is recommended only for seventh through 12th grades. He said that the book remains available in the school library.

Velasquez, who has written several books dealing with pressures faced by Latino/a youth, is planning to keep a scheduled engagement to speak at the school, where half the students are Latino/a. Because school officials have demanded that she not speak about the book, she told the *Camera* she will address the issue of censorship.

CYBERSPACE

Eighteen-year-old Bennett Haselton, founder

of Peacefire, a teen organization fighting Internet censorship, has created a program that reveals the Web sites blocked by Cybersitter, software intended to restrict access by minors to illicit material.



His program decodes the software's "filter file," or list of blocked sites; without it, even a person who purchased the software could not know what sites are blocked.

According to the e-zine *CNET*, Haselton developed the program because he believes Cybersitter violates free speech rights. Haselton says Cybersitter blocks Web sites that contain the words gay rights, safe sex, nudity, pornography, guns and suicide, among others. It blocks most queer sites, including PlanetOut and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. The software also screens out the National Organization for Women's Web site, because it contains information about lesbianism.

Representatives of Solid Oak Software, which sells Cybersitter, say the company is investigating the legality of Haselton's decoding program.

FLORIDA

A state circuit court in Fort Lauderdale heard opening arguments May 5 in a constitutional challenge to a law banning adoptions by lesbians and gay men. The suit was filed by the American Civil Liberties Union, which argued that the law is based on prejudice and fails to serve a legitimate government interest.

In a press statement, the ACLU said the law also violates the equal protection guarantee of the Florida Constitution.

ILLINOIS

The Rev. Hiram Crawford Sr. and four other men have filed the first legal challenge to Chicago's March 19 ordinance granting health and other employment benefits to same-sex partners of city workers, according to a story in the *Chicago Tribune*. The lawsuit alleges that the city exceeded its home-rule power in adopting the ordinance. Crawford was an outspoken opponent of the measure during City Council hearings before it was passed.

During hearings critics raised financial as well as moral objections to the program. City officials estimated the cost of the benefits at about \$800,000 per year, however, some aldermen argued that Chicago would likely be obliged to include unmarried heterosexuals in its policy in order to avoid discrimination charges, escalating the cost to nearly \$6 million annually.

INDIANA

More than 200 students and faculty members gathered on April 24 in front of the University of Notre Dame's administration building to protest the school's failure to include sexual minorities among those protected by its nondiscrimination policy, according to a report in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Students held a similar protest in 1995 when the administration refused to recognize a gay and lesbian student group, saying its purpose was inconsistent with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, with which the school is affiliated.

During the controversy two years ago, the administration formed a committee to address the needs of queer students. Although that committee recommended last year that the university amend its nondiscrimination statement to include sexual minorities, students say school officials have yet to take action.

A spokesman for the school told the *Chronicle* that the committee's recommendations are "under consideration," but refused to comment further.

Compiled by Christopher D. Cuttone

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