

national briefs

CALIFORNIA

According to an estimate from the San Francisco-based accounting firm KPMG Peat Marwick, 13 percent of all U.S. employers provide health benefits to the partners of lesbian and gay employees—and the cost is negligible.

The survey of some 1,500 companies with more than 200 workers found that technology employers represent the highest percentage offering the benefits, at 20 percent, with the government and retail sectors not far behind, at 17 and 16 percent, respectively.

"We found that the cost of coverage for firms offering and not offering the coverage to nontraditional partners was equivalent," Peat Marwick's Jean Kim told the *San Francisco Examiner*.

FLORIDA

Conservative University of Florida student senators unsuccessfully challenged funding of the school's Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Student Union at a June 17 budget session.

A package of amendments that would have slashed the organization's \$18,973 allocation was overwhelmingly defeated, according to the *Independent Florida Alligator*.



Retired professor Bill Laing received permits June 17 to begin construction of a housing complex in northern Manatee County that will cater to lesbian and gay retirees.

Known as Palms of Manasota, the complex will include 24 single-family homes, 44 apartments and a 22-unit assisted living facility, according to the *Bradenton Herald*.

Buyers will not purchase property but rather the right to live in homes and apartments, and later receive care in the assisted-living facility, says Laing.

With the first homes expected to be ready in six months, Laing is planning future developments for the site, including a nursing home and a shelter for babies with AIDS who do not have parents.

MAINE

Two anti-gay-rights groups began a campaign on July 4 to gather enough signatures to halt a law prohibiting discrimination against gay men and lesbians.

In May, state lawmakers approved a measure that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing, public accommodations, employment and credit. Gov. Angus King signed it a few days later.

State chapters of the Christian Coalition and the Christian Civic League seek to collect the signatures of more than 51,000 certified voters within 90 days.

If the groups succeed, the nondiscrimination measure passed by the Legislature must go to a statewide vote.

MONTANA

The Montana Supreme Court handed down a unanimous decision July 3 overturning one of the most stringent state laws criminalizing private sexual activity by gay men and lesbians.

The court found that Montana's Deviate Sexual Conduct Law, which called for up to 10 years in prison and as much as \$50,000 in fines, was in violation of the state Constitution's guarantee of privacy.

Five states and the District of Columbia have decriminalized sodomy and four others have sodomy-repeal measures pending. According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 20 states continue to outlaw same-gender sodomy.

NATIONWIDE

The U.S. Conference of Mayors adopted a

resolution June 24 in favor of needle-exchange programs as a method of restricting the spread of HIV.

The resolution urges state and local public health officials to "utilize appropriate federal resources for needle exchange as part of a



community's comprehensive HIV prevention plan," and presents information supporting the effectiveness of such programs.

The mayors are calling on Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala to lift the ban on spending federal money on needle exchanges.

PENNSYLVANIA

Philadelphia City Council President John F. Street's challenge to a mayoral order granting taxpayer-funded benefits to the same-gender partners of city employees was sent back to the Human Relations Commission by a state appeals court.

According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Street, acting as a private citizen, obtained a temporary restraining order in June blocking the domestic partners policy; he then appealed a lower court's decision to turn the issue over to the city's Human Relations Commission.

Street, who opposes the policy on moral and fiscal grounds, had set out to prove the order is discriminatory under the city's Fair Practices Ordinance. Unless he takes his case to the state Supreme Court, the matter will remain before the commission, a group of nine mayoral appointees.

TEXAS

A Texas appeals court ruled July 3 that a lesbian is entitled to sue for visitation rights to her ex-lover's child, providing same-sex partners a legal standing denied in some other states.

The ruling by the 3rd Court of Appeals didn't turn on the question of Lisa Ann Fowler's sexual orientation nor decide whether she should be allowed to visit the child, who was conceived with the help of a sperm donor.

Rather, the decision was based on a provision in state law that says such a lawsuit may be brought by a person "who has had actual care, control, and possession of the child for not less than six months preceding the filing of the petition."

Under that standard, Fowler's lawsuit should go to trial, a three-judge panel said, overruling a lower-court judge who had dismissed the lawsuit on the grounds that Fowler didn't have legal standing.

This is the first such ruling by a Texas appeals court.

WISCONSIN

On May 27, the Milwaukee Presbytery voted by a 2-1 margin to oppose the national Presbyterian Church/USA's ban on ordaining gay men and lesbians, which became church law in March with the help of more conservative regional presbyteries in the South, reports the *Wisconsin Light*.

The regional body, a group of 51 congregations with more than 15,000 members, was the first presbytery to inform the denomination it had adopted a "covenant of dissent."

The Rev. Carl Simon, parliamentarian for the Milwaukee Presbytery, referred to the covenant as a matter of civil disobedience.

Fred Jenkins, of the church's national office in Louisville, Ky., told the *Light* that dissenting congregations had been warned via letter that such covenants might result in legal action by the national body.

Compiled by Christopher D. Cuttone

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