

# Frank goes to bat

The congressman proposes domestic partner benefits for federal workers, and expects support of conservative colleagues

by Bob Roehr

Federal workers may one day have domestic partner benefits, thanks to a bill recently introduced by Barney Frank, an openly gay Democratic congressman from Massachusetts.

During an Oct. 29 news conference, Frank discussed his Domestic Partnership Benefits and Obligations Act of 1997, which covers all 1.9 million civilian federal employees.

If the measure passes, don't think its impact will be felt solely in the nation's capital—only 14 percent of the federal workforce calls that region home.

Many more federal workers are scattered across the country, from isolated forest service watchtowers to huge regional federal centers in urban locales like Boston, Atlanta and San Francisco.

"My colleagues, especially on the conservative side, tell us regularly that we should model our practices after the private sector," Frank said.

"So I have taken them at their word."

Domestic partner benefits have been sweeping through private industry like a tsunami. The trend began in the high-technology sector, when companies sought to attract the best talent, and now has spread into many other sectors.

Recently the Texas-based Electronic Data Systems, a computer services giant founded by former presidential candidate Ross Perot, announced it will offer health benefits to domestic partners of gay and lesbian employees.



Barney Frank

PacificCorp, parent company to Utah Power and Light, said the same thing from the heart of Mormon country.

Benefits can constitute up to 40 percent of compensation according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Most accrue directly to workers but some go to employees' families. Lesbians and gay men are often excluded from those benefits.

Helen Gonzales, public policy director for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, offered this example: "It's the same as advertising a job in the newspaper saying, 'Salespeople wanted: Salary for married heterosexuals \$12 an hour, salary for unmarried heterosexuals and gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered persons \$7.20 per hour.' We would all recognize that as unfair, illegal and discriminatory."

U.S. Rep. Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.) added, "All Americans deserve equal pay for equal work. For too long, gay and lesbian federal employees with lifetime partners have received far fewer employee benefits than their heterosexual coworkers with lifetime partners, simply because of their sexual orientation. It is time for the federal government to honor and recognize loving, committed relationships—whether they look like Ozzie and Harriet or John and Kevin."

"We hear politicians talk about family values," said William Delahunt (D-Mass.). "Implicit in that concept is responsibility. When people

have made a commitment to each other, that carries with it a sense of responsibility. It's time our federal government acknowledges that."

Frank explained that 1978 civil service reforms restricted hiring and firing decisions to qualifications and job performance. Thus it was possible to interpret existing law to end anti-gay job discrimination in the federal workplace.

"[But] money cannot be paid out of the federal treasury without statutory authorization. And no one would argue that there is statutory authorization for domestic partnership benefits, particularly when you talk about the pension system, which is very tightly regulated," he said.

Frank also said opponents of domestic partnership benefits "who tell us that it will be totally disruptive to the social fabric and extraordinarily expensive...have with unerring accuracy been wrong."

Tim Boggs, a senior executive with Time

Warner, said benefits have been an "enormous success" for his company's 70,000 employees, while Jack Krumholtz, a lobbyist for Microsoft, hailed them as a "recipe for success."

Elizabeth Birch, executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, added that domestic partnership benefit programs have been "running in the private sector throughout the 1990s without one documented case of fraud. No company with such a policy has withdrawn it.

Moreover, in the private sector, the cost has been minimal."

"The reality is that personnel turnover and recruitment expenses far exceed the cost of extending benefits to domestic partners," said Lowey.

She cited the example of New York City, where fewer than 2 percent of city employees have enrolled in the program.

As Frank explained, in many couples both partners work, have benefits through their jobs, and don't need to take advantage of domestic partnership benefits.

His staff had discussions with the Office of Personnel Management in drafting technical aspects of the bill. The Congressional Budget Office will evaluate it, as it does every piece of legislation, for its fiscal impact.

According to Frank, the Clinton administration has not endorsed his bill.

"But I'm going to keep pushing. I intend to make clear to the president and vice president how important their support will be," said Frank, who also called the bluff of congressmembers who last year voted for the anti-gay Defense of Marriage Act. Some of those said they would opt to support domestic partnership alternatives.

"This is a 'put your money where your mouth is' issue," said Frank. "There is absolutely no reason for somebody who said that not to endorse this bill."

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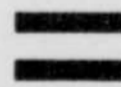


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