

Some government officials are seeking to preclude gay men and lesbians from adopting or becoming foster parents; Texas and Arkansas are two of the current battlegrounds.

In the Lone Star state, bills have been introduced in the Legislature that would deny these rights to lesbians and gay men.

In Arkansas, a recently created Child Welfare Review Board is pushing to make Arkansas the second state to ban gay men and lesbians from being foster parents. (The ban must pass more hurdles before it takes effect.)

"These are big pieces of legislation. They will be important to defeat and very difficult to defeat, but we're already holding meetings in every city in Texas," says Dianne Hardy-Garcia, the executive director of the Lesbian and Gay Rights Lobby of Texas. "I want people to understand the seriousness of the adoption and foster care legislation. It's the first step to removing us from access to children."

Republican state Reps. Warren Chisum and Robert Talton filed the bills to ban the placement of children into gay or lesbian households.

According to the Jan. 2 issue of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, Chisum said such households provide an improper atmosphere for raising children.

"It is not conducive to Judeo-Christian beliefs and it can be destructive for the children," he said, adding that heterosexual couples offer the most solid home and best lifestyle.

Critics, however, balked at that assertion.

"People who support proposals like this say they are pro-family, but what more anti-family thing can you do than to say to children in foster care that we are going to deny you the opportunity to be raised by loving parents who could give you a good home and leave you in institutional care instead?" asked Matt Coles, director of the lesbian and gay rights project at the American Civil Liberties Union.

In Arkansas, meanwhile, the Child Welfare Review Board voted 6-1, with one abstention, to bar gay people from becoming foster parents.

Some ban opponents expressed concern that their opinions were not heard before the Jan. 6 vote.

THE PARENT FLAP

Some state authorities decide life with gay folks is not in children's best interest by Gip Plaster

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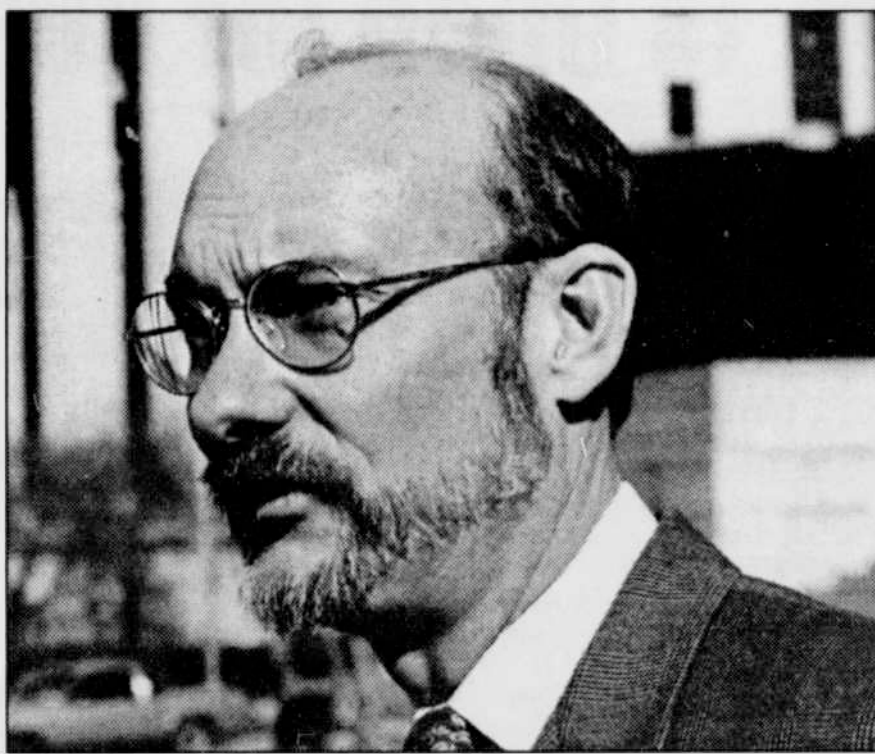


PHOTO BY BOB ROEMER

"We feel like the board overlooked the evidence and voted in an unfair way against gays and lesbians as foster parents," says Bryan Goodman, a spokesperson for the Interfaith Coalition for Equality, a group of gay and straight people who support equal rights and oppose the ban. "We would have liked to have been heard."

But Robin Woodruff, the board member who introduced the resolution last June, says there had been plenty of time for public comment.

She believes there are good reasons why gay men and lesbians don't make good foster parents. She emphasizes the importance of "a mom role model and a dad role model," and notes that sodomy is illegal in Arkansas.

Woodruff also says there is no evidence of "positive long-term effects of homosexual parenting." In addition, she maintains gay people have more sexual partners than heterosexuals and are more susceptible to diseases, including HIV and AIDS, gonorrhea, anal carcinoma and

"a rare group of intestinal diseases [that] have been grouped together under the title 'gay bowel syndrome.'"

The board must now hold additional hearings. After another vote, it can then send its proposal to the Arkansas Legislative Council, which can hold another hearing if the public requests it. The process will likely take several weeks.

If it passes, the prohibition will become an agency regulation but can be overridden via statute.

Arkansas state Rep. Jim Lendell, who is considered gay friendly, says if asked he would consider introducing a bill to counteract the measure. Even so, Lendell says the bill would likely flop.

Rita Sklar, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Arkansas, says her organization will sue if the regulation gets the stamp of approval.

"This [board] is appointed by the Southern Baptist governor," Sklar says. "It just seems to be created to do this sort of thing."

This past fall, Sklar provided the board with dozens of documents that support the ACLU's position in opposition to the ban. Those materials included documents from the American Psychological Association and reports from experts whose findings are in opposition to the sources Woodruff cited.

Many organizations—including the APA, the Child Welfare League and the North American Council on Adoptable Children—oppose the use of sexual orientation as a criterion in foster care and adoption placement.

The ban still has two hurdles to clear before becoming a regulation, but Sklar says she "couldn't imagine it getting much opposition" in Arkansas.

In the late 1980s, the New Hampshire Legislature passed a law banning gay men and lesbians from both adopting and serving as foster parents. This year, the state's lawmakers will consider whether to repeal the law.

Florida banned gay men and lesbians from adopting in 1977. In Oklahoma, people convicted under the state's sodomy law cannot adopt.

Last year, bills that would have prevented queer people from serving as foster parents, adopting or both were defeated in Arizona, California, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Georgia. Similar measures will likely be introduced this year in Indiana and Michigan.

The Utah Division of Child and Family Services has drafted a policy aimed at having the same effect in that state.

After the Arkansas vote, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force denounced the board's actions and pledged to stop that measure and similar proposals elsewhere.

"This ban is not about the welfare of children, it's about attacking and demonizing gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people," says Kerry Lobel, the executive director of NGLTF. "We will face similar battles in a number of states this year, and we will do everything in our power to face down these lies, distortions and myths with the simple truth."

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