

care benefits that include coverage for sex-change procedures for its city work force.

If the plan gets the expected approval from the Board of Supervisors and Mayor Willie Brown, the city's health plan will begin July 1 covering sex-change operations, hormone treatment and related medical needs. San Francisco's Health Service System board quietly approved the new benefit in February, almost five years after activists began pushing for the coverage.

"This is very much a civil rights issue," Supervisor Mark Leno told the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "This is about equal benefits for equal work."

City officials say they know of about a dozen self-identified transgendered people on the city's payroll. Some have undergone surgery, some have decided to undergo hormone treatment only, and others have yet to decide to what extent they'll change their sex through medical procedures. Any surgery or treatment to this point has been paid by the individual.

For males changing to females, surgery costs about \$37,000. The surgical costs for females becoming males runs considerably more, about \$77,000.

The proposed city health benefit for sex-change procedures would cap at \$50,000 a person for life. The benefit also would not cover the entire cost of surgery, requiring the patient to pay 15 percent if he or she uses a surgeon affiliated with the city's health plan and 50 percent to go outside the plan.



Pamala Stone (left) and Becky Thompson are ready to move

TEXAS

The Walt Whitman Community School, the country's only private school addressing the educational needs of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered teen population, will move from its current location to a much larger space March 17. The new building will allow Whitman to expand to 10 classrooms and increase the number of students it serves.

Founded in 1997 by executive director Becky Thompson and Pamala Stone, Whitman has grown from 15 to 26 students this semester partly because of exposure in a national magazine. The Dallas school offers traditional academic classes in addition to psychology, health issues and living skills classes geared to this specific population.

A Host Family Program, added last summer, allows three out-of-state students to attend Whitman. "This move comes at a difficult time in the middle of the school year, but we have just run out of space at our current location," Thompson said.

Whitman receives no federal, state, city or county funding and relies on civic and community donations and fund-raisers. The

move creates a need for more tables, chairs, bookcases and all other requirements of a school.

"Everything that the school has accumulated in the last four years has been donated, and this move will mean that we have a new need for tables, chairs, books, computers and bookshelves," Thompson said. For more information call 214-855-1535.

MASSACHUSETTS

The state's first analysis of suicide has revealed that gay students try to kill themselves at a particularly high rate, the *Boston Globe* reports Feb. 28.

A 1997 survey of about 4,000 high schoolers indicated that about 10 percent of them attempted suicide. But when that figure was broken down by sexual orientation, the study uncovered a wide discrepancy between homosexual and heterosexual suicide attempts: 40 percent vs. 10 percent.

Still, gay students are not considered predisposed to suicide, according to Ellen Connorton, Department of Public Health violence prevention and intentional injury coordinator. "They are no more mentally unstable than other students, but they are susceptible to victimization by their peers."

Deputy Commissioner Paul Jacobsen said his agency devoted \$750,000 of last year's budget toward preventing gay teen suicide but since has decided to focus on outreach to all students. "It's such an important issue, it really needs to be integrated into all youth programs."

Suicides rarely can be attributed to a single factor, mental health professionals say. By and large, they stem from an ongoing pattern of emotional crises.

However, experts blame a lack of suicide prevention programs for the alarming numbers. Connorton presented the data to 30 shocked members of the Norfolk County Anti-Crime Council.

"Suicides outnumber homicides 4 to 1," she said. "And how much money is in the budget for suicide prevention in the general population? Zero."

ILLINOIS

William Wrigley Jr. Co. has begun marketing Big Red in *OUT* magazine—the first time a chewing gum ad has been targeted specifically to queer consumers, according to the Gay Financial Network. "It's new, unlike your pickup lines," says an ad in the publication's March issue.

Wrigley is trying to reinvigorate the cinnamon-flavored gum, which saw sales deflate for five years until the launch of a new general market campaign last year, according to Chris Tussing, account director for Big Red at BBDO, an advertising and marketing firm in Chicago. "The brand

wasn't as contemporary as it needed to be," he said.

Seeking a younger, more urban audience, the 110-year-old Chicago-based gum

manufacturer decided to advertise in a gay magazine for the first time this year. Wrigley's also markets Doublemint, Spearmint, Juicy Fruit, Winterfresh, Freedent and Extra but never before has included gay media in the plans for these products. **JM**

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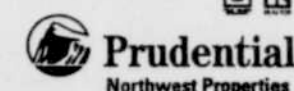
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