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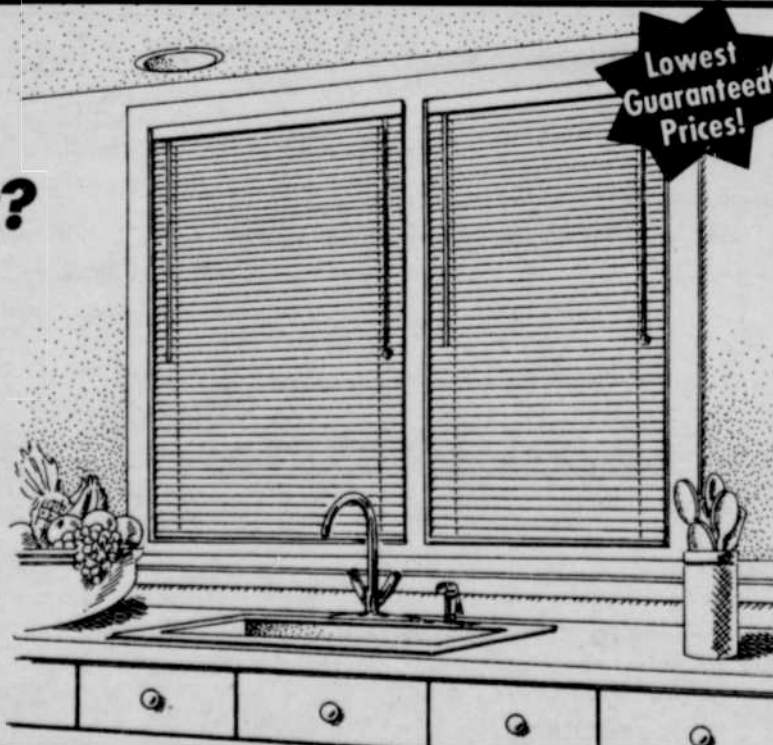
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NATIONAL news

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tion of this amendment, Sen. Kennedy's efforts have significantly diminished the most harmful aspects of the original Helms language," said Winnie Stachelberg, Human Rights Campaign political director.

The Senate voted Nov. 7 to allow the District of Columbia government to fund a program giving domestic partners of city employees access to health benefits.

The House defeated an amendment Sept. 25 that would have denied local funding for domestic partner benefits in the district.

In 1992, Congress voted for the D.C. Health Care Benefits Expansion Act, giving domestic partners of district employees access to health benefits purchased at their own expense. But for nearly a decade, Congress has blocked the district from using local or federal funds to implement the law.

The domestic partner provision in the Senate version of this bill is the same that passed the House, thereby making it "nonconferenceable." Winnie Stachelberg of the Human Rights Campaign praised the vote by saying, "We look forward to the swift completion of this bill, with this provision intact, and President Bush's signature on this historic legislation."

UTAH

A long, expensive court battle against student-run groups intended to support gay youth and their friends has ended for the state of Utah, which spent a quarter-million dollars defending a Salt Lake City school board ban, lawyers said Nov. 13.



A quarter-million dollars later, the East High Gay/Straight Alliance is going strong

Not only was the battle expensive for Utah, it ultimately did nothing to deter students from organizing the support groups, known as gay/straight alliances. Today, among the hundreds around the country, every public high school in Salt Lake City has at least one group supporting gay students.

Lawyers representing the students in their suit against the Salt Lake school board accepted the final court-ordered payment for attorney fees, closing the last chapter on a struggle whose cost to the state, counting its own legal expenses and its payments to the students' lawyers, totaled about \$250,000.

"It's unfortunate that students who would have benefited from these clubs were deprived of that opportunity during this lawsuit," said Jon Davidson, Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund senior counsel. "But the end result is that



U.S. Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass. (right, with President Bill Clinton), helped forge a compromise on an anti-gay amendment

everyone learned an important lesson about the nondiscrimination mandates of federal law as well as the value of gay/straight alliances, which now exist at nearly 800 schools around the country."

Stephen Clark, American Civil Liberties Union of Utah legal director, said: "The efforts of those opposing these groups clearly backfired. In fact, groups supporting gay students are now thriving at nine schools in Utah. I hope the government's wasted effort and money will deter other school districts from undertaking these harmful and ultimately futile attempts to ban these clubs."

Shannon Minter, National Center for Lesbian Rights senior staff attorney, added: "Attempts to discriminate against gay/straight student alliances have failed in Utah and nationally. The fact that students stood up in the face of opposition even in a conservative stronghold like Utah shows how essential these support groups are to the lives of so many students, both gay and nongay."

Under the Equal Access Act, secondary schools that receive federal funds and that allow noncurricular student groups to meet on campus are prohibited from discriminating against any clubs based on their viewpoints.

When students at Salt Lake's East High tried to organize a gay/straight alliance in 1996, the school board officially banned all noncurricular groups in an effort to stop them.

In a lawsuit challenging the school board's actions, a federal judge ruled that the district violated the Equal Access Act in 1998 by allowing some noncurricular clubs to meet but prohibiting the gay/straight alliance from meeting. In a subsequent lawsuit, a second federal judge ruled that the district also violated the First Amendment in 2000 by attempting to ban a gay-themed curricular club.

In the wake of these decisions, school officials agreed to rescind their anti-gay policy in the fall of 2000. Subsequently, the court ordered the state to pay attorney fees to the lawyers representing the students. The final payment of attorney fees now officially ends the lawsuit.

CALIFORNIA

Gay activists, angered about unverified health department claims of a "big syphilis spike" allegedly driven by Internet chat rooms, urged America Online to resist pressure from government officials to post sexually transmitted disease warnings exclusively in cyberspots where gay men meet.

ACT UP members called the posting plan the "bigoted brainchild" of Dr. Jeffrey Klausner,

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