

# WHAT ABOUT THE SURVIVORS?

New York advocacy groups address disparities in relief assistance by Jim Radosta

**A**s if losing a partner to terrorism isn't bad enough, gay and lesbian survivors are dealing with the insecurity of not knowing whether they will be eligible for support from the federal government.

The September 11th Victim Compensation Fund was established to provide financial support for people whose relatives were killed or injured in the attacks. Because same-sex relationships are widely denied legal recognition, surviving lesbian and gay partners are grappling with additional trauma: "proving" they are a family member.

Several civil rights groups—including Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, the National Center for Lesbian Rights and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force—are urging Attorney General John Ashcroft to act fairly during the compensation process. The organizations asked the Justice Department to recognize that lesbian and gay survivors of this tragedy need the same security

and support as everyone else who is grieving.

Their letter to Ashcroft makes specific recommendations on how to evaluate relationships in the absence of blood or legal ties. Activists say individuals who can show a relationship of mutual interdependence—such as sharing a residence, finances, day-to-day activities and the emotional bonds of a family—deserve help in this time of need.

The letter suggests the federal fund should mirror New York's law governing emergency relief awards, which grants surviving partners benefits comparable to surviving spouses. "We urge the attorney general and the Department of Justice to follow the lead of Gov. [George] Pataki and New York state and provide equally for all families, including gay and lesbian families, who lost their loved ones during the horrible events of Sept. 11," said Matt Foreman of the Empire State Pride Agenda.

Activists have been working with lesbian and gay surviving partners since the attacks. The letter stresses how important it is that all types of benefits be available to help them.



Matt Foreman

"To achieve the stated purpose of the fund, it is critical that these regulations reflect the reality of relationships and families in today's society," said Elizabeth Birch, Human Rights Campaign executive director. "Doing so would complement what other significant private relief efforts, including the American Red Cross and the Sally Mae 911 Education Fund, have already done by recognizing the domestic partners of victims when disbursing survivor benefits."

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund noted that even if Ashcroft agrees to the groups' request, lesbian and gay survivors still will not be eligible for other benefits of the safety net offered by government and employers, including Social Security benefits, pensions, health care coverage, death benefits and workers' compensation. "Because they could not marry, surviving lesbian and gay partners of this tragedy are suffering not only the additional psychological trauma of having their relationships ignored but may also suffer

the consequences of not being equally supported in their time of need," executive director Kevin M. Cathcart said.

Meanwhile, the American Red Cross has issued an official policy of fair treatment for gay and lesbian families suffering from the loss of a loved one Sept. 11. The new guidelines were written in response to a meeting



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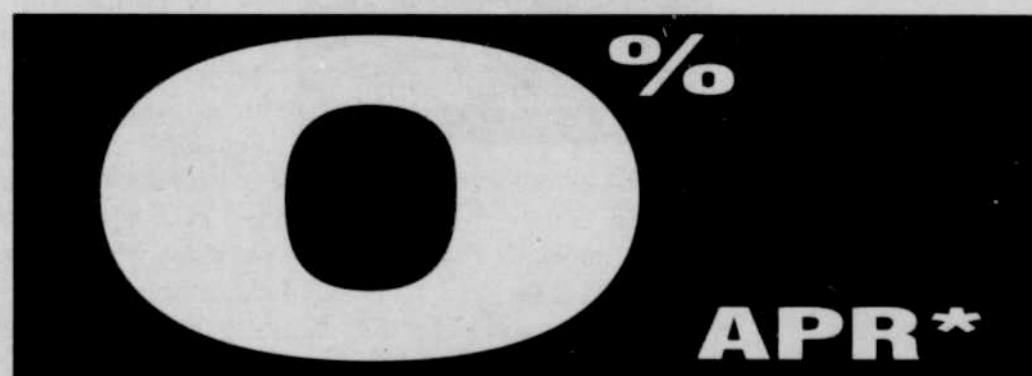


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