

## NATIONAL news

bureau, more than 50 people handed in their gifts. "As long as AP's policy is all chain and no key, doors remain closed," they wrote in a letter.

Queer employees have demanded equal treatment for more than a decade. They have watched the number of media companies that do not extend health benefits to domestic partners dwindle to nearly none. They have watched some of their best and brightest colleagues leave jobs they loved for companies that showed compassion for their spouses and children.

AP and the News Media Guild—the employees' collective bargaining unit—have been negotiating a new contract. The guild once again demanded the extension of benefits to domestic partners; AP's response was, once again, silence.

Following the lead of its flagship publication, *The Orange County Register*, Freedom Communications Inc. has become the first national chain to enact a policy encouraging all of its newspapers to print same-sex union announcements.

The change—confirmed Dec. 17 by Janet Ryan, assistant to the president of Freedom Community Newspapers—involves a total of 35 publications across 11 states, including *The [Alton, Ill.] Telegraph*, *The Brownsville [Texas] Herald* and *The [Panama City, Fla.] News Herald*. Since August 2002, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation has kept a tally of newspapers that print same-sex union announcements, and this decision brings the total to 181.

"This is another huge step for gay and lesbian couples," executive director Joan M. Garry said. "We are proud to have fueled a discussion in the newspaper industry that leads corporations to consider the equity of their policies towards gay and lesbian readers. Freedom Communications deserves to be congratulated and should serve as a role model for other companies."

### MISSISSIPPI

After reviewing Judge Charles Pickering's record, the Human Rights Campaign strongly restated Jan. 8 its opposition to his nomination to the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals. According to political director Winnie Stachelberg, his career has been punctuated by racial divisiveness, and he publicly has shared anti-gay sentiments.

"Past behavior is usually the greatest indicator of future behavior, and Pickering's past has included highly disturbing racial overtones that make him an unusually unacceptable nominee," she said. "His opinion of gay people also seems to mirror other unpleasant and disturbing prejudices that have defined his career and been the hallmark of his time on the bench.... We



Charles Pickering would sit on the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans, which serves Mississippi, Texas and Louisiana

adamantly urge Bush to reconsider this poor choice for a crucial judicial circuit."

In a speech before the 1984 Mississippi Southern Baptist Convention, Pickering lumped homosexuality with social problems, according to *The Clarion Ledger*, a Jackson, Miss., newspaper. "We as Southern Baptists should lead the way in strengthening traditional moral values," he said, adding that society has been degraded by such things as pornography, homosexuality and divorce.

Pickering was nominated last year by President Bush. But his nomination was rejected in March by the Senate Judiciary Committee along party lines, mainly out of concern about his record on civil rights.

### ILLINOIS

By a vote of 8-1-1, the Springfield City Council has voted to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. It now becomes the state's 13th jurisdiction to enact queer civil rights legislation and the fourth central Illinois city to do so in the past year.



Rick Garcia

"The passage of a strong gay rights bill in the heart of the heartland sends the distinct and clear message that fair-minded middle Americans support gay and lesbian civil rights," said Rick Garcia, Equality Illinois political director. "This is a great success and paves the way for a statewide bill to ban anti-gay discrimination."

The City Council heard almost two hours of testimony supporting and opposing the ordinance. Opponents, mostly fundamentalist Christians, claimed that the law would violate religious institutions' ability to preach against homosexuality and that queers spread disease and are a threat to children and society.

The Illinois House and Senate are expected to take up a statewide nondiscrimination bill shortly, and activists in the cities of Rockford and Peoria are considering introducing nondiscrimination legislation. In Illinois, Cook County and the cities of Bloomington, Champaign, Chicago, Decatur, DeKalb, Evanston, LaGrange, Naperville, Normal, Oak Park and Urbana include sexual orientation in local ordinances.

### FLORIDA

Civil rights activists are applauding the Key West City Commission's unanimous decision to amend the local nondiscrimination law to include trans people. The ordinance is now the most inclusive in Florida and the first in the state specifically protecting trans people from bias in employment, housing, public accommodations and lending.

"Key West's slogan is 'One Human Family,'" said Scott Fraser, Key West Gay & Lesbian Community Center director. "The City Commission demonstrated that those words are not hollow."

Stratton Pollitzer, Equality Florida's Southern regional director, predicted that at least three other communities in the state might amend their laws this year to provide similar rights for trans people. "Efforts to protect transgender people are currently under way in St. Petersburg, Monroe County and Seminole," she noted.

Although Key West is the first city in Florida to amend its human rights law to add gender identity or expression, it is not the first in the state to recognize the need to protect trans people from bias. In 2000, Wilton Manors passed a law requiring all business that contract with the city to include sexual orientation and gender identity in their nondiscrimination policies. ☐

Compiled by News Editor JIM RADOSTA, who can be reached at jim@justout.com.

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