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**NATIONAL news**

**NATIONAL**

The federal agency responsible for investigating workplace discrimination issued a statement April 8 saying that discrimination based on sexual orientation is prohibited in federal workplaces. Gay rights activists were deeply concerned with recent reports that the U.S. Office of Special Counsel was retreating from its long-established policy of investigating and enforcing disciplinary action against sexual orientation-based employment discrimination against federal workers.

The OSC removed references to sexual orientation-based discrimination from its complaint form, its basic brochure, training slides and a two-page flier titled "Your Rights as a Federal Employee." It also removed from its Web site a June 2003 press release that announced the settlement of a case involving discrimination based on sexual orientation against an applicant to the Internal Revenue Service. According to the April 8 statement, the office "intends to review and revise those materials."

In a recent interview, OSC head Scott Bloch created a distinction between "conduct" and "status" as a gay man or lesbian, claiming a federal employee could legally be fired or demoted based solely on sexual orientation. In response to questions from congressional Democrats, a White House spokesperson March 31 said President Bush does not support discrimination but refused to say what action would be taken to address the problem.

"The president should stop ducking behind empty rhetoric," said Terry McAuliffe, Democratic National Committee chairman. "His appointee has announced he will reverse 30 years of rights for lesbian and gay Americans—and the president has done nothing.... It's time for this president to stop winking at his right-wing base and start acting to protect the rights of all Americans."

"After being together for 34 years, we've learned a lot about love and commitment," said plaintiff Regina Cicchetti, who lives with Susan Zimmer in Port Jervis. "I don't know that I could have made it through two life-threatening illnesses without the support of Susan. As we face getting older, we see more and more how the state disadvantages us by not letting us marry."



Georgia's only openly gay assembly member, Karla Lee Drenner, tried to stop a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage

**GEORGIA**

The Georgia House passed an amendment to the state constitution March 31 that denies same-sex couples and their children the basic protections and equal rights of marriage. Voters will face the question on the state ballot in November.

"No constitution should be used to discriminate," said Cheryl Jacques, Human Rights Campaign president. "The people of Georgia deserve to be protected equally under their guiding document."

The amendment needed a two-thirds majority—or 120 votes—to pass. Although the House defeated the measure in February, it returned to the floor last month and passed by a vote of 122-52.

"The whole debate has really transformed the lives of many gays and lesbians in Georgia," Allen Thornell, executive director of Georgia Equality, told *The New York Times*. "For the first time, they've decided to stand up for themselves, be honest about who they are and say why their families deserve protection."

The only openly gay assembly member, state Rep. Karla Lee Drenner, D-Avondale Estates, was a strong advocate against the measure. Even former U.S. Rep. Bob Barr, R-Ga., who authored the federal Defense of Marriage Act, voiced his disapproval of the measure and is fighting a change to the U.S. Constitution.

**FLORIDA**

Six same-sex couples filed suit April 15 in Key West demanding an end to marriage discrimination in Florida.

"Today... is a day when millions of same-sex couples across the nation take on our responsibility as citizens and pay our taxes. Yet our government fails to take on its responsibility to provide us equal protection under the law," said Stratton Pollitzer, Equality Florida southern regional director. "Tax day is a particularly poignant day to file this suit because it also marks the first time in our nation's history that same-sex couples, having been legally married in Canada and in cities throughout the nation, are being asked by our government to lie and file as 'single' on their tax returns."

**NEW YORK**

The American Civil Liberties Union sued New York state April 7 seeking to strike down as unconstitutional a law that denies same-sex couples the right to marry.

"Same-sex couples who commit to each other and build a life together need the protection of the law just as straight couples do," attorney Matt Coles said. "The lives of the couples in this case show all too vividly how unfair it is to deny them that protection."

The lawsuit, filed in state court in Albany, charges that the law violates the equal protection, privacy and due process provisions of the New York Constitution. The lawsuit was filed on behalf of 13 gay and lesbian couples, many of whom had hoped to be married by New Paltz Mayor Jason West but were unable to do so after he was forced to stop performing same-sex marriages.

The couples come from all walks of life, ranging from a state assemblyman (Rosie O'Donnell's brother Danny) and a New York City police officer to a shipping clerk and an artist. Many have been together for decades, and some are raising children together. One couple has grandchildren.



Hotel director Oneida Garcia (left) and police officer Alice Muniz are among the couples seeking marriage equality in New York

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