

When Turner asked him about her right to appeal his decision, he informed her that she had no such right and that he was the ultimate decision maker.

The chief judge did not issue a written order explaining his decision, as required by state law. Without either an official case file or a written order, Turner was left in legal limbo, with no ability either to proceed with her name change or to appeal the chief judge's decision.

Lambda Legal's complaint argues that the circuit court clerk and the chief judge failed to follow proper procedure by refusing to allow Turner to proceed with her name change while her request for a fee waiver was pending and by refusing to issue a written order explaining the reasons for denying the fee waiver.



**Actor Heath Ledger was found dead Jan. 22 in his SoHo apartment.**

sex domestic partners of city employees does not violate state laws restricting marriage to one man and one woman. "The extension of health care benefits does not afford a legal status, 'identical or substantially similar to that of marriage,' nor does it in any way trample on any purported public policy favoring marriage over unmarried cohabitation," Ramsey wrote in her judgment.

**NEW YORK**

**Heath Ledger Dies**

Actor Heath Ledger was found dead Jan. 22 in an apartment in Manhattan, according to the New York City police. He was 28.

According to the police, a masseuse discovered Ledger when she arrived at the fourth-floor apartment of the building, in the SoHo district. His housekeeper and masseuse found him naked and unconscious on a bed, with sleeping pills—both prescription medication and nonprescription—on a night table. They attempted to revive him, but he did not respond. They immediately called the authorities.

The police said they did not suspect a crime. Ledger was said to be suffering from insomnia and possibly pneumonia. He had just traveled from Australia and London, returning Jan. 21 to New York.

Heathcliff Andrew Ledger was born April 4, 1979, to Sally Ledger, a French teacher, and Kim Ledger, an engineer. Named for a character in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, he and his older sister, Katherine, grew up in Perth, Australia.

The role for which Ledger was probably best known was in 2005's *Brokeback Mountain*, in which he played a gay cowboy. The film won critical acclaim. Ledger was nominated for an Oscar for Best Actor in January 2006.

Ledger met actress Michelle Williams while filming *Brokeback Mountain*. They became romantically involved and moved to Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, where they lived with their daughter, Matilda Rose, who was born Oct. 28, 2005. The couple separated last year.

Ledger had been cast as the Joker in the latest Batman installment, *The Dark Knight*, which is expected to be released this summer. 10

Compiled by JAYMEE R. CUTI

**LOUISIANA**

**New Orleans Offers Partner Benefits**

The Civil District Court for the Parish of Orleans ruled Jan. 24 that the city of New Orleans was within its authority when it granted health benefits to domestic partners of city employees and established a domestic partner registry for city residents.

"This lawsuit needlessly jeopardized the health and well-being of city employees and their families by threatening to take away their health insurance," said Lambda Legal senior staff attorney Brian Chase.

The city of New Orleans extended health insurance benefits to same-sex partners of city employees in 1997, and in 1999, the City Council created a domestic partner registry that allows couples to make a public declaration to care for and support each other. Those policies came under attack in 2002 from the Alliance Defense Fund, on behalf of a group of city taxpayers claiming a right to challenge the laws. At the city's request, Lambda Legal joined the lawsuit, representing city employee Peter Sabi and his partner, Philip Centanni Jr. Sabi and Centanni later left Louisiana, and city employee Brian Barbieri and his partner, Howard Lees, joined the lawsuit.

Chief District Court Judge Nadine Ramsey ruled Jan. 15 that the state constitution does indeed grant the city of New Orleans the authority to offer benefits to the domestic partners of city employees and maintain a registry of domestic partners. She also ruled that extending health care benefits to the same-

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