
National Association of Social Workers

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TO: House Judicial Committee
RE: In Support of H - 5744. Marriage Equality

Marriage Equality, Bicycling and Civil Rights

I cannot remember a time when I did not support equal rights for Gay and Lesbians individuals. (Later I learned about trans-gender and questioning individuals and added them to this group also. It is never too late to become more sensitive to the rights of others.) When I was very young, I had the privilege of knowing several men and women who were gay or lesbian and see how others treated them. To me, they were just human, like myself, who also happened to treat me with love and respect and that's all that was important to me at the time. Later, I came to appreciate the harsh discrimination they faced.

As we age and we gain more life experiences, we are generally exposed to more diversity, and it's through these experiences we gain an appreciation for differences. On the other hand, we can also become more rigid as we adopt the values of those around us. With this in mind, this testimony is speaking to all Committees members regardless of your positions.

In America, civil rights always win over prejudice. Please be cognizant that I do not use this word lightly. We all harbor prejudice at some level either past or present, so this word is not meant to insult. A lack of exposure, understanding, fear and/or prejudicial thinking leads to discriminatory thinking and action, even when we are not aware of this process.

The wonderful thing about America is that basic civil rights are guaranteed. Although it may take a long time, these rights have been won in various ways through court actions, legislatively or by executive order. In Rhode Island, we hope to win marriage equality rights through legislative action. It took over 130 years for women to gain the right to vote, almost 100 years for black Americans to walk the land as free individuals, and many more years for women, people with disabilities and other minorities to gain a number of other civil rights. In the end however, the rights were and continue to be gained. Looking back, none of us would even question these rights now. What changed? **The answer is that we adopted values of equality and applied them to various groups which previously had been discriminated against.**

Massachusetts, Maine, Connecticut, New Hampshire (pending), and Iowa have all gained the basic human right which ensures that couples who love and respect each other, can be married regardless of gender. Rhode Island now recognizes those marriages and it's just a matter of time before same gender couples will be able to marry in Rhode Island also. This basic human right will be won community by community, state by state, region by region, until all American loving couples, regardless of where they live, will be free to marry.

We, the over 146,00 members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), hold an absolute and unshakable belief that any couple, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, have a basic and human right to marry in the United States. We have backed this belief up in our local Chapter by testifying and supporting the Marriage Equality effort in Rhode Island since the fight began. Our national office has supported Marriage Equality by filing Friend of the Court Briefs in every state that court action has taken place.

Following are a few points that address concerns by people opposed to same gender marriage.

1. Religious and Morality Concerns

We refer to same gender marriage as Civil Marriage to emphasize the point that marriage in Rhode Island and the US is a civil procedure authorized by local governmental authority. Nothing in this bill prohibits the provision of religious ceremonies. One of the founding principles of our country is the separation of church and state. Religious morality definitions interpretation of God's will in this case, does not apply to the civil procedure of marriage. **There is considerable disagreement by religious factions, concerning marriage equality. In fact, there are 91 practicing religious clergy in Rhode Island who support civil marriage. No one religion or no set of religions has a right to impose their specific ideology on civil matters.**

Professional mental health and medical associations both locally and nationally support civil marriage as a right and do not view gender preference as a disease or immoral in any respect. In fact, the possibility of severe mental health issues when the sexual identity of an individual is suppressed by the individual or society, is of major concern. It is important to note that just like heterosexual couples, sexual attraction in a relationship is just a small part of a healthy relationship and the key to successful relationships is mutual trust, love, and respect. In this respect, all humans are alike.

It is the view of the National Association of Social Workers - Rhode Island Chapter (NASW - RI), that each religion should follow its own beliefs in the question regarding whether their religion should perform same gender marriage ceremonies or not, however **religion ideology should not be a reason to block passage of this legislation. It is also our firm view that gender identity is part of the human experience not an immoral disposition.**

2. Marriage Equality as a Civil Right

NASW - RI believes that, any time an identifiable group living within our borders are not allowed full inclusion and participation in our community, the issue is a matter of civil right. We will continue to fight for recognition for this and other civil rights issues until the rights are gained.

3. Definition of Marriage as a Man and a Woman

We do not believe that society or individuals in our society, no matter how powerful, have a right to impose this definition on the community at large. Whether this definition is that of the majority belief or not it has any relevance. Civil rights should never be blocked by the majority. This is a basic fair principle of our country. **The majority cannot dictate to the minority when rights are in question.** We are unable to comprehend any justification to impose the definition of marriage to be between ONLY a man and a woman.

4. Same Gender Parenting

Of the considerable number of **academically juried studies** that have been performed related to same gender parenting's effect on children, none of the studies to date, have found any measurable negative effect what- so- ever on the children. In fact, studies have found a positive effect. Below is the opening paragraph of a study performed by Charlotte J. Patterson, Ph.D. which is indicative of the studies reviewed for this testimony.

In summary, there is no evidence to suggest that lesbian women or gay men are unfit to be parents or that psychosocial development among children of lesbian women or gay men is compromised relative to that among offspring of heterosexual parents. Not a single study has found children of lesbian or gay parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents. Indeed, the evidence to date suggests that home environments provided by lesbian and gay parents are as likely as those provided by heterosexual parents to support and enable children's psychosocial growth.

Source: APA- Online <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/publications/lgpconclusion.html>

Professional social workers have found the conclusions stated above to be true and accurate.

5. Negative Change to Society

We have not found any negative changes in society in states and countries that have recognized same gender marriage. In fact, recognition of differences is positive to societal relationships. Virtues of fairness, love, and respect are wonderful values to promote. It is the belief of the NASW - RI that no community can maximize its health until all groups living in that community are treated with fairness and equality.

All of the above statements have been anecdotally verified though my bicycle rides around New England, New York, New Jersey and Rhode Island. Over the last four years and 3000 miles bicycling, I have literally talked to thousands of people, many of whom were not sure about their feelings regarding same gender marriage. After a short conversation, most have been able to confront their uncertainty and have actually changed their opinion to that of support. They just needed a little information, a safe place to process that information, and some time, not much, to think it through. Over 1600 individuals from 28 states, five foreign countries and Washington, DC have signed the following "Traveling Proclamation for Marriage Equality".

I, the undersigned, believe that same sex couples should have the right to marry in all states and should be afforded, without hindrance, the same rights and privileges that heterosexual married couples now enjoy."

If any committee member would like to discuss factors relating to marriage equality, please do not hesitate to call me. Thank you.

Respectively Submitted,

Rick Harris, LICSW
Executive Director