

Election pleases gay activists

Gay and Lesbian Task Force is holding its Creating Change conference in KC.

November 11, 2006

By LYNN FRANEY

The outlook for more laws protecting gay people from discrimination improved with Tuesday's elections, say national gay-rights leaders meeting in Kansas City.

"It's the first election result we've been encouraged by in 14 years," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, based in Washington, D.C.

The Task Force's 19th annual Creating Change conference for activists working on causes involving gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people began Wednesday at the Westin Crown Center hotel. It ends Sunday.

Foreman addressed close to 2,000 people attending the conference from across the country Friday morning. The conference offers strategies for political and community organizing by people interested in workplace equality, AIDS/HIV prevention, transgender rights and gay-inclusive churches.

This week, for the first time, a state's voters — Arizona's — rejected a constitutional amendment that would have defined marriage as between a man and a woman and prevented government from giving legal recognition to unmarried partners of the same sex or opposite sexes. Same-sex marriage bans passed in other states on Election Day, but Foreman said the victory margins often were smaller than they were in 2004.

"With all of this, we can feel new hope and optimism — so, so different than so many years in the past," Foreman said.

Now, four in 10 Americans live in states that ban workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Missouri and Kansas do not offer that protection, although Kansas City bans discrimination.

"People tend to lose sight of how much progress we've made" in the 37 years since a riot by patrons of New York's Stonewall Inn bar after a police bust launched the modern gay civil rights movement, Foreman said in an interview Thursday.

Besides workplace protections and recognition for same-sex couples, the gay civil rights agenda also includes fighting for greater penalties for people who commit hate crimes against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people; legislation protecting gay high school students from harassment; and the expansion of domestic partner health benefits.

Democratic wins in Congress and the election of new U.S. senators such as Missouri's Claire McCaskill pleased Joe Solmonese, president of the national Human Rights Campaign. He also came to Kansas City for the Creating Change conference.

He praised Kansas City lawyer Jolie Justus, who was elected as Missouri's first openly gay state senator.

She is a trailblazer who not only will make a difference in the General Assembly on issues involving gay and lesbian people, but who also "will open for the door for the next one," Solmonese said.

But other conference attendees said they still doubted that real change would take place.

Tuesday's election results were good "for the movement because Republicans have been so un-gay friendly," said Pat Langley, a university professor from Springfield, Ill, who brought four students to Creating Change. "But I don't really trust Democrats to do the right thing. I don't know. We'll see."